SMASH HITS AND DEEP HIDDEN MEANINGS

THE MUSIC AND PRODUCTIONS OF NILE RODGERS

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MASTER THESIS

DEPARTMENT OF MUSICOLOGY

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

MAY 2013

Acknowledgements

The process of completing this thesis has been rewarding, as well as strenuous at times. I would like to thank my supervisor, Anne Danielsen, for providing critical advice, guidance and inspiration. Thanks to Yvette Beaudoin Smith for proofreading and positive remarks. Also, lunch conversations with my fellow students at the Department of Musicology have offered unexpected insights and reflections through my work on this thesis.

Last, but not least, I would like to salute the patience and support of my beloved family, Ina and Oddne.

Oslo, May 2013

Joakim K. Kristiansen

Table of Contents

Chapter One - Introduction

"That ain't no earthquake", he says," That's just Chic"

- Rick James

1.1. Background

My entry into this project probably has its origin in me being a guitar nerd with a childish curiosity towards the sounds created by the electric guitar and its plethora of accessories.[1] Spending my early childhood in the post-MTV 1980s, the imagery surrounding the electric guitar was vivid and colorful. Big hair, spandex and flamboyant behavior were totally alien to a kid surrounded mainly by forests and fields in the Norwegian countryside. The musicians were characters to me with a cartoon-like appeal. Aside from the appearance of these axe-wielders, the sound and look of the instrument itself was intriguing.

I remember being puzzled by the fact that such a huge, sustaining, distorted sound could emanate from the instrument. Of course, I had no insight in how the electric guitar actually worked as a physical, musical interface. The theatrical antics of the eighties guitar players provided further mystery, with elaborate stage moves that did not directly relate to the actual playing of the instrument. A brief career - on what was to me a rather dull sounding, 70's Yamaha two-manual organ did not stifle my curiosity towards the electric guitar. A few years later, I ended up getting my first electric guitar, an Angus Young style Gibson SG copy, plus a way-too-big Marshall amplifier. I was on my way. Fast forward to today, countless guitars and amplifiers later, and that initial curiosity toward the possibilities of the instrument remains.

So, that is where I am coming from, with the story of my musical point of departure. How does this relate to the music of Nile Rodgers then? For me, the journey started with listening to "Let's Dance" by David Bowie. That sound of the pulsating rhythm guitar hook, with its tempo-synced echoes puzzled me. Also, I liked

[1] This refers to everything that is included in the sound producing audio path: cables, "stomp boxes" (effect pedals), bows, amplifiers, speakers and so forth.

the track as a whole, especially with the entrance of its searing blues lead entering halfway through.

With a growing interest in learning the details of the recordings I liked along with an aspiring interest in jazz, I developed the habit of examining the record sleeve notes for details on who did what on records developed. Particularly with jazz recordings, the emphasis on the individual contribution of each player in the ensemble is of essence. In fact, the players are often credited on the cover, rather than in small print inside.[2] Small print was no obstacle in discovering the names of the people behind the scenes as well as the stars up front. Certain names seemed to appear frequently on the albums my friends and I listened to. There was the TOTO crew with the Porcaro brothers on bass and drums, and guitarist Steve "Luke" Lukather. There was drummer Steve Gadd and bassist Nathan East. Steely Dan employed a host of top shelf musicians in their "musical chairs" style of record making, including drummers Rick Marotta, Bernard Purdie and Jim Keltner, guitarists Jay Graydon, Dean Parks and Larry Carlton, bass player Chuck Rainey and so on. When discovering Frank Zappa, again there was an ongoing list of "small print musicians" to be discovered. Among the randomly chosen names mentioned, Nile Rodgers could also be included. Producing and playing on some massive hit records during the eighties, his name was somehow familiar to me even though I had no specific knowledge of his music.

Fast forward to the beginning of this project, it came about through a combination of a primarily subconscious curiosity of the "Let's Dance" guitar riff combined with mere happenstance. I somehow stumbled upon a radio interview of Rodgers published on YouTube, and was fascinated by this condensed one-hour version of his life and career. There were so many success stories, including Chic, Sister Sledge, Diana Ross, David Bowie, Duran Duran, Madonna and INXS. In addition, he had written, co-written, produced and played in most of the recording sessions. The possibility of exploring all these areas in one project was a strong incentive, and the outcome will be presented on the following pages. One last note I would like to add is that my entry through the aforementioned Bowie record has in

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[2] Inside in this case would refer to the typical layout of a CD cover, which was the dominating distribution media through my formative years as a player. An LP would typically have the details printed on the back of the sleeve.

retrospect appeared as starting in the tail end. I had no particular interest in the music of the disco era. In fact, I thought of it as bland, superficial and uninteresting,[3] a value judgment I would suspect comes from my background, rooted in the concepts of authenticity concepts related to the jazz and rock milieu.[4] However, as the disco era music of Chic was an integrated part of the "package", it needed to be included nonetheless.

As Robert Walser addresses in his discussion on Kenny G and questions of value, the goal of analysis is to "be able to account for the music's appeal." (Walser 2003:37) Although this introduction might suggest a suspicious point of departure, this project has contributed greatly to my understanding and appreciation of a genre of music where my initial knowledge was previously limited, at best. A bonus is the joy of discovery, which has provided both motivation and inspiration through the course of this project.

I will start by presenting a brief biographical summary, with an emphasis on the events leading up to the breakthrough of Chic. In the following section I will provide a description of the methodological foundation used throughout the thesis. Also, I will include definitions of key terms, and how I intend to apply them in my text.

Chapter two will pick up chronologically where the biographical summary ends. In other words, through this chapter I will concentrate on various topics of Rodgers work. As this period is vital in establishing both the style of performance, the songwriting formula and the production techniques found in productions outside Chic, it will provide a platform for my analysis of the tracks selected for this purpose in chapter three. Here I will first discuss the role of the producer, then to go into a detailed analysis of three hit productions involving external artists. In the last chapter I will summarize my thesis, and provide a discussion on the main research question in light of the information I have presented through the thesis.

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[3]I remember being fascinated by the falsetto voices of the Bee Gees as a child, but that is as far as it went down the disco path.

[4] For an in depth discussion on the romantic notion of rock authenticity, see Gracyk 1996, 175-206.

1.2. A biographical note

Through his writings on Irving Berlin, Charles Hamm describes the cultural "melting pot" of New York City. Hamm describes the city as a cultural scene where collaborations crossed ethnic borders, and how the writers working out of the infamous Tin Pan Alley absorbed different styles of music into the popular music repertoire. The key point in this, as Hamm explains, is how the adaptation of different styles into the popular music of the day made it available to a broader audience. "Remarkably, though, despite their regional origin and character, Tin Pan Alley songs came to be accepted far beyond the community in and for which it had been created". Hamm exemplifies this with how jazz, coming from a different community than that of the predominately white crew of Tin Pan Alley, was adopted into the musical "toolbox" of these songwriters:

> This music was jazz, and its acceptance by people outside its home community, like that of Tin Pan Alley song, seems to be explainable by this observation: Although it retained important aspects of the character and the distinctive musical style of the people who created it, it also accommodated and assimilated enough external aspects of America's older and more dominant culture to make it easily accessible to those outside the community as well. (Hamm in Brackett 2009:3-4)

Roughly half a century after Israel Bailine - more commonly known as Irving Berlin - penned his breakthrough song "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (ibid.) Nile Gregory Rodgers was born in New York City. More precisely, the day was September 19th in the year 1952.[5] A result of his mother offering her virginity as a birthday gift to Nile's biological father Nile Rodgers Sr., Beverly Goodman had her son Nile Gregory Rodgers at age 13. Rodgers only had occasional contact with Nile Sr. through his childhood and youth. Instead, Rodgers adopted his mother's new boyfriend and later husband Bobby Glanzrock as his main father figure. The fact that Bobby was a white man of Jewish decent made for a controversial couple. As Rodgers writes: "Even in Beat Generation Greenwich Village, New York City, circa 1959, interracial couples weren't exactly commonplace." (Rodgers 2011:4) Being surrounded by the Beatnik culture through his childhood and early adolescence seems to be an important formative experience for Rodgers. Although Rodgers describes his parents as having

[5] The biographic material used in this section was found in Rodgers' autobiography, *Le Freak, An Upside Down Story of Family, Disco and Destiny* (2011).

a severe drug addiction, they were also sharing their vivid interest in the "hip" cultural scene of the day. He describes the input from his parents in the following manner:

> They exposed me to such disparate things as Shel Silverstein, Gahan Wilson, Lenny Bruce, sexology, Mikhail Botvinnik, Go (a Japanese board game), and the Village Vanguard, which featured the top jazz artists in the world. I knew about all these things, and I could discuss them in depth. It was an exciting education in progressive thinking. But it was Music I loved in an all-encompassing way. (Rodgers 2011:14)

The story of Rodgers childhood and youth contains such a colorful array of incidents and characters that going through it all would take up a significant amount of pages. Therefore, I will move forward to the period of Rodgers' life where he became a full time professional musician. This happened in 1970, when Rodgers started the band New World Rising. Being involved in the hippie movement, Rodgers was surrounded by a great number of people playing guitar, providing him with new input as a guitarist (ibid.:95). During the period, in which New World Rising was playing, the music scene in the Village was shifting. Rodgers describes being a part of the "first wave of jazz-blues-rock-fusion electrified bands in the Village." (ibid.:97)

The next important step in Rodgers' musical development was joining a musical education program called *Jazzmobile*, receiving lessons from jazz guitarist Ted Dunbar. During This period, he also took classical guitar lessons with Maestro Julio Prol. Most importantly, these lessons in jazz and classical guitar instilled Rodgers with musical reading skills. Being able to read sheet music played a vital role in Rodgers' career as a session musician (ibid.:101).

Advancing from picking up subbing gigs,[6] Rodgers then acquired a regular position as a member of the touring ensemble backing the "Sesame Street" show. Through professional connections made during the "Sesame Street" tour, he landed a steady gig in the house band of the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. This gig exposed Rodgers to a host of the biggest names in African-American music of the day, and provided a competitive environment in which he further sharpened his musical skills.

It was through a pick-up gig with a trumpeter called Hack Bartholomew that Rodgers was to meet his future partner, Bernard Edwards. The two had a rough start, where Edwards ended the phone conversation with the words "Yo Brother, do you want to do me a favor? Lose my number." (Easlea 2004:55) However, the two

[6] This term describes substituting for other musicians in various settings.

musicians reconnected later on unaware of being the same two guys that had spoken on the phone earlier.

Doing a series of more or less random gigs, Edwards and Rodgers eventually formed The Big Apple Band, which was to evolve into Chic later on. This pre-Chic band is documented through videos on the website YouTube.com, showcasing clues to what was to become the musical foundation of Chic.[7],[8]

1.3. Methodological considerations

As indicated above, this text will be concerned with matters within the field of popular musicology. In this section, I will discuss the different approaches found within the field, as well as providing a framework for the further investigations that will be occurring throughout this text.

The title of this thesis provides an explicit hint as to what I will present throughout this paper, the music and productions made by Nile Rodgers. The basic question is: *what are the distinctive features found in his work?* Asking a seemingly simple question such as this has a wide reach. I will in particular focus on the recorded output of Chic, and his contributions to albums fronted by solo artists or groups outside the Chic framework. In the latter case, my goal is to find features within the recorded material that conveys what could be dubbed the producers "signature".

The statement above brings me onto another point that needs to be addressed. My main source of material in terms of the music and production work done by Rodgers will be the recordings. This is an essential point as to the methods I will be applying throughout my analysis, following a tradition within musicology that was gaining traction in the early 1990's. Differing from the former tradition within musicology, which was based around the analysis of written music in the form of scores, this tradition is based on a subjective interpretive approach to the recorded material. In his book "Studying Popular Music", Richard Middleton addresses issues

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[7] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJhyd4fJtas

[8] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=An2OZSaY8To

of applying traditional methods in the context of popular music studies. An issue I would like to bring forward is the emphasis on certain parameters as a consequence of the focus on notation, at the expense of features that are not easily transferred to manuscript paper. Middleton puts forward a listing of examples as to what these parameters are.

> … discrete pitches within the diatonic/chromatic system; organized combinations of such pitches (chords) and of melodic parts using those pitches (counterpoint); mathematically simple durational relationships; through-composed structures (involving relationships of phrases, sections and movements, and thematic relationships and developments); combinations of voices and instruments (texture; orchestration). Conversely, they tend to neglect or to have difficulty with parameters that are not easily notated: non-standard pitch and non-discrete pitch movements (slides, slurs, blue notes, microtones, and so on); irregular, irrational rhythms, polyrhythms, and rhythmic nuance (off-beat phrasing, slight delays, anticipations and speed-ups, and the complex durational relationships often involved in heterophonic and 'loose' part-playing, and overlapping antiphonal phrases); nuances of ornamentation, accent, articulation (attack, 'envelope'); and performer idiolect; specificities (as opposed to abstractions) of timbre; not to mention new techniques developed in the recording studio, such as fuzz, wah-wah, phasing and reverberation. (Middleton 1990:104-105)

This statement leaves little doubt that there is a wide palette of features found in popular music that is hard to grasp and conceptualize using traditional musical notation. Among the literature answering to this challenge was Allan F. Moore's *Rock: The Primary Text* first issued in 1993, revised in 2001. Through this book, Moore presents an interpretive approach focusing on the sound represented on records. This book contained the widely adopted interpretive framework dubbed the "sound box". I will provide a more in-depth discussion on this term later in this text, as I apply it in my own analysis of selected tracks. In recent years, the body of material involving a subjective, aesthetic approach to recorded material has grown significantly. I will draw on several of these discussions throughout this paper, confronting the challenge of describing audio references on paper.

1.4. Key terms

An often-used term in the description of recorded music is "sound". As a term, "sound" is open-ended, and can be defined in a number of ways depending upon the context in which it is applied. In the following section I will provide examples of how the term is applied in a selection of texts. Drawing on the examples given, I will propose a definition of what the term encompasses in the context of my thesis.

Timothy Warner presents an interpretation of the term in the context of his work analysis of productions made by producer Trevor Horn. Warner separates the work of the composers from that of the producer, using the "sound" to the describe Horn's contributions. This approach separates what Warner describes as "harmonic and melodic ideas" from that of the production itself. "Horn's contribution would appear to be in the 'sound' (that is the choice and combination of timbres and the way those timbres are manipulated through technological processes)." (Warner 2003:140) He also attributes the "feel" and the structuring to Horn, as part of the producers influence. What I find to be problematic by the way Warner applies the term lies in the division of parameters. In separating certain aspects of the process in order to assign them to a contributing source, he seems to suggest a linear dynamic as present in a recording situation. What I wish to address by pointing this out, is that the process in a recording situation is not an assembly line of songwriting, arranging, recording and so forth. All parameters remain malleable throughout, and *can* be influenced by any person involved. Consequently, he skips past the fact that most recording processes are highly dialogic. As Jerry Wexler of Atlantic Records states in Zak (2001) "It's like who does what to whom in bed. Nobody knows. ...Nobody knows what goes on at a record session unless you're sitting there. ... In the long run, what emerges is that the credit accrues to the whole team." (Zak 2001:164)[9]

In his article "The Stax Sound: A Musicological Analysis" (1995), Robert Bowman applies a broader use of "sound". This is evident in his choice of heading, identifying a certain studio with a specific "sound". Clearly, this encompasses more than the mere sonic realm. Describing the early recordings,[10] Bowman provides a description as follows: "Using one studio, one equipment setup, the same set of musicians and a small group of songwriters led to a readily identifiable sound. It was a sound based in gospel, blues, country and earlier forms of rhythm and blues. It became known as southern soul music." (Bowman 1995:285-286) The way Bowman

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[9] For a thorough discussion on the nature of the recording process, see Zak 2001, 24-47.

[10] Bowman identifies two separated periods of the Stax output. The first period, described by me as 'the early recordings above, spans from 1961 to 1969/70. The second period runs from 1971/72, ending in the label filing for bankruptcy in January 1976 (Bowman 1995:285-286)

describes the "Stax sound", he clearly considers the sum of the production chain as contributing to the sound of the label. During the second period of the label, the fragmentation and expansion of the recording process resulted in the sound losing its uniformity. "During the second period one cannot speak of a 'Stax sound' *per se*. The label no longer had a single identity, as records were produced in various cities by non-Memphis-based producers, writers, musicians and singers." (Bowman 1995:286) Though my text will not include a "sizeable body of repertoire" for statistic comparison, as found in Bowman's discussion, the way "sound" is applied as a term will bear a close resemblance to what is described above. In other words, I approach the term as an all-encompassing summing of all the work spanning from the initial idea to the finished product. As explained earlier, a selection of recordings involving Nile Rodgers in one way or another will constitute this finished product. Since Rodgers in most cases was involved in most of the stages of the process, i.e. songwriting, playing and producing, I see the need for this broad approach. Choices not only involving recording/studio technology, but also arrangements, melodic and harmonic elements and the overall formal aspects all contributes significantly to the "sound" of his productions. An example of this is Rodgers "signature" guitar style, which is can be heard on nearly all the productions and sessions throughout his career. A recent example of this is Rodgers' contribution to the track "Shady" (2012) by Adam Lambert of American Idol fame.[11] A more detailed technical discussion on Rodgers' playing style will be conducted in the following chapters.

Another distinction I would like to make at this point is the between the *song* and the *track*, since I have already used the term "track" in the previous segment. This distinction based on the approach of Zak in *The Poetics of Rock - Cutting Tracks, Making Records*. The purpose of separating the two is to gain clarity as to what is being described. Zak describes the song as a "musical entity", "… a song is easily separated from any particular recorded rendering." (Zak 2001:25) A track, on the other hand, refers to a specific rendering of the song. Following this train of thought, a specific rendering of a song on record will be referred to as a track. An example of this would be cover versions, for example the song "You Really Got Me" originally written by Ray Davies and recorded by The Kinks. Van Halen later recorded a cover

[11] Appears on: Adam Lambert (2012). *Trespassing,* R 2397439, RCA

version, thus the same *song* is represented on through two different tracks. The same would go for the jazz tradition of recording "standards", where the *songs* are transmitted via either recordings or "The Real Book".

Apart from the terms I have discussed above, terminology used to describe studio technology and sonic details will appear throughout this text. As these terms will be described in the given context, I will not go through these in detail at this point.

1.5. Outline of thesis

In my attempt to account for the diversity of Nile Rodgers career, as well as characterizing his sound as a distinct signature will require the employment of a variety of theoretical approaches. To paraphrase the introduction to Timothy Warner's *Pop Music, Technology and Creativity, Trevor Horn and the Digital Revolution* (2003), my focus will be primarily concerned with the artistic aspect.

The question I am setting out to answer through this thesis is, as previously stated: what are the characteristics of Nile Rodgers' sound? In light of the definition of "sound" that I have put forward, a broad discussion is required to provide answers. I have chosen to approach this project through dividing Rodgers career into two main areas of study. The first of which will be presented in chapter two. Through this chapter, I will start out concentrating on style, musicianship and the creative process. Drawing on discussions on sound from other styles of music, the approach through this section will mostly comparative. Especially Jon Fitzgerald's writing on the creative process of Motown has provided a fruitful point of departure, through focusing on the roles of the contributing forces involved the production. This also includes the importance of the session band at Motown, as a key contributor to the overall sound. Introducing issues of musicianship, this discussion is of key

importance to my reading of the "primary texts"[12] that are to be analyzed in the sound analysis section of chapter two.

Chapter three will be based on the analysis of three tracks produced by Nile Rodgers outside the Chic framework. The tracks are "We Are Family" by Sister Sledge, "Upside Down" by Diana Ross and "Let's Dance" by David Bowie. All three were pivotal tracks in establishing Rodgers as a star producer. The emphasis through this chapter will be on the production elements, providing an in depth analysis of the sonic elements of each track. Leading into the analysis, I will discuss the role of the producer. The reason for this is the fluid nature of this role. In other words, the influence and responsibilities of the producer vary greatly between each individual. Drawing on the results of the analysis, my goal is to describe specific traits that can be associated with Nile Rodgers.

In my conclusion I will point at what I have found to be the key discussions through this thesis. Besides this, thoughts on the limitations of the scope I have chosen will be provided in this section. As my main research question involves a broad field of study, the goal of the conclusion is to provide a map on how all these relate back to the basic idea of describing the sound of Nile Rodgers music and productions.

[12] These terms are found in Moore (2001). Moore uses the term "primary text" to describe "… that is constituted by the sound itself." (Moore 2001:1) Thus the term "reading" refers to the interpretation performed by the analyst.

Chapter Two - Chic

"It is a very blank, repetitive sound,
fastidiously but not fussily made" - Daryl Easlea

Through this chapter I will go investigate the significance of the band Chic to the career of Nile Rodgers. This will involve addressing issues of genre and style, the importance of musicianship, creativity, composition and production. Through this discussion my goal is to provide a basis for identifying the element that contributes to the sound of Chic. And, in the extension of this, is the "Chic sound" synonymous with the "Nile Rodgers sound"?

2.1. Disco – Style and Genre

In his introduction to Andrew Kopkinds' article "The Dialectic of Disco: Gay Music goes Straight", David Brackett suggests a three way division within the disco genre. "During 1975-76, disco began to concentrate on three main tendencies. The first, "R&B disco", was derived more directly from previous styles of soul and funk, often retained gospel-oriented vocals and syncopated guitar and bass parts, and was sometimes recorded by self-contained bands associated with funk, such as the Ohio Players, Kool and the Gang, the Commodores and KC and the Sunshine Band" (Brackett 2009:351).

The subsequent two trends are "Eurodisco", which he associates with less syncopation, heavy use of synthesizers and orchestral elements and "simple, chanted vocals". The third trend called "pop disco" refers to pop artists adapting a disco sound into mainstream pop. This latter form, as Brackett suggests, is closely linked to the movie *Saturday Night Fever*: "The final transformation of disco from a genre associated with gays, blacks, and Latinos to one embraced by straight, white Americans occurred with the success of the film, *Saturday Night Fever,* released late in 1977." (ibid.) An important point made by Brackett towards the end of his text is how Eurodisco and pop disco ended up as being the chief defining styles of disco, at the expense of the R&B disco style. He names Chic as *the* most important exponent

of the latter style. (ibid.:352). The way these terms are coined seems to suggest an approach to genre based on the notion of a certain stylistic heritage, although this is not entirely consistent. In the instances of pop and R&B, the terminology provides implication as to what the musical content might be. Eurodisco, however, evokes a notion stretching towards an autonomous description. This follows from the fact that simply referring to the word "euro" does not directly connect it to a lineage of musical style. Flipping the view slightly, one might see the references as to which the particular style of disco might appeal to, i.e. a pop or R&B inclined audience. In other words, a radio station playing an Isaac Hayes track would be more likely to play a Chic track than a BeeGees track.

Directing attention towards the potential recipients of the musical product introduces the position of genre as a marketing device, as Simon Frith writes; "... the use of genre categories to *organize the sales process.*" (Frith 1996:75) As Frith goes on to argue, the use of genres are an important tool in directing the marketing of a given musical product towards the right group of consumers. "Genre is a way of defining music in its market or, alternatively, the market in its music." (ibid.)

As Chic broke through commercially on the disco scene, it is not surprising that they ended up being marketed as a disco act. The story of how an early demo of "Everybody Dance" was auditioned on the disco scene[13] at "The Night Owl" gave a strong indication of where the prime market for Chic's was to be found. So, the commercial breakthrough of Chic happened within the peak of success within the genre of disco[14]. As a consequence of this, the music of Chic is written into the disco narrative. Rodgers paraphrases David Bowie saying, "If you come from art, you'll always be from art." (Rodgers 2011:95)

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[13] Both Easlea (2004:84) and Rodgers (2011:126-127) emphasize the importance of the demo single of "Everybody Dance" being played at "The Night Owl" club by the resident DJ, Robert Drake. Drake also was the engineer on the session resulting in the mentioned track.

[14]Also, according to Fikentscher, the innovation within the genre reached its peak at the time Chic broke through in 1977 (Fikentscher 2000:28). The release of the movie "Saturday Night Fever" introduced the disco scene to a mass audience, securing a cross over appeal.

Kai Fikentscher places emphasis on the mediation and the performance environment associated with the music, as the main criteria in his definition of disco. In the context of disco, these two factors are essentially concentrated around the concept of playing records. The participation in a disco event provides an alternative environment to that found outside, emphasizing the aural over the visual through providing darkness and continuous music. Fikentscher also suggests the inclusion of disco into a "continuum" of "North American dance crazes" (Fikentscher 2000:22-23). Although both the aspects of social dancing and mediation are at the core of the disco genre, they give few clues as to what makes music sound like disco per se. The point I am making here is that as a descriptive term of musical content, the way the term disco seems to provide few clues as to the musical content. However, the way it is discussed by Rodgers in terms of his own music provides some insight into how he arrived at his signature sound.

The reason for choosing these two albums is that they defined the Chic sound. I also would rate these albums as the most influential of their production, launching the producer careers of Edwards and Rodgers. It could be argued that the third album *Risque* could also be reckoned, based on the fact that it contains the track "Good Times", which in turn supplied the bass line used in the first hip-hop smash "Rappers Delight" by Sugarhill Gang. The risk involved in making a division based on perceived popularity through figures gathered from market based charts that it installs sales as the chief parameter. Simon Frith asks "Are market choices (as measured somewhat inaccurately by the cultural industries' own research devices) really all we mean by popular?" (Frith 1996:16) Even though such a question is certainly worth asking, there are indications of these early albums being the most musically successful, and influential as well. For one, in interviews given in recent years, Rodgers uses examples form these albums more frequently than the later material.[15]

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[15] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QugEtSwmHsw
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-S_7X3NEmw
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gF1d227_4ac
(All pages viewed 10.04.2013)

Also, searching the database www.whosampled.com shows that the first albums are by far the most sampled.[16]

Using designations such as R&B disco mentioned above yields further problems that are worth notice. One is the implication of an organic evolution of styles, in order to make sense of what came after. As Danielsen points out in her analysis of "Diamonds an Pearls" by Prince (Danielsen 1998), approaching developments in popular music as a part of a linear narrative is highly problematic. A possible motive for this urge to connect one musical style to a previous narrative involves issues of value. In the case of Nile Rodgers and the way Chic was associated with the disco genre, Rodgers seems eager to write himself into an alternate narrative. An example of such rhetoric can be found in his autobiography, where he refer to bands that in his words shared their "musical DNA" (Rodgers 2011:154). What this statement, besides the explicit reference to an organic terminology, implicates is the need to construct a narrative that connects between the music of Chic to references that are associated with values outside the confines of disco.[17] Looking at the Jazz tradition, a similar employment of referential material can be found. In the article "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography" (1991), Scott DeVeaux argues that in order to construct an organic lineage in the history of Jazz, a stylistic connection between earlier styles of jazz and "Bebop" appeared. Even though bebop was essentially a new style "... bebop was such a departure that to consider it a new type of music was not out of the question." (DeVeaux 1991:538) Through ignoring the discontinuity in favor of the view of an organic whole, the link between bebop and

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[16] http://www.whosampled.com/sampled/Chic/ (viewed 10.04.2013)

[17] For reference, the statement by Rodgers is concerns the period in time following the "disco sucks" campaign (Rodgers 2011:154). Fikentscher describes this period as follows: "Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, these associations have often been expressed both in disparaging remarks at the music (such as 'This music sucks,' 'It's cheap and has no inherent value') as well as the associated milieu ('Disco is faggot music' or 'Disco people are superficial and do a lot of drugs'). In the United States, the disco backlash, as emotional as the disco craze that had spawned it, culminated in 1979 in a public record burning, orchestrated by radio DJ Steve Dahl in a Chicago baseball stadium to the chant of thousands: Disco sucks!" (Fikentscher 2000:11)

earlier styles jazz was established. This changed the narrative of the music in retrospect. As DeVeaux writes:

> Bebop allowed jazz to become... an autonomous art, transcending its sometimes squalid social and economic setting, and taking its place in American culture as a creative discipline of intrinsic integrity. Once this goal is accepted, the whole narrative for jazz history must be adjusted accordingly. For if bebop is the juncture at which jazz becomes art music, then earlier styles are once again in a precarious position - unless it can be demonstrated that in some important sense they had *always* been art music and that this status was simply unacknowledged. (ibid. :544)

So, in the case of Rodgers, this dynamic can be seen as a reason to why he often emphasizes his own background as a jazz musician. The emphasis on harmonic complexity that Rodgers exhibits through interviews and masterclasses suggests a need to connect, and sometimes justify, his music to an art music narrative. As the marketplace moves quickly, making such connections is important in securing a success that can be seen as artistically influential as well as enjoying the ephemeral inclusion in the world of the top 40. The point I am making here is that even though the music of Chic at the time of its release was made to please the disco audience, it does not necessarily fit into the historical connotation of the term. As Fikentscher argues: "As a description of a musical style, the term disco fell quickly into disuse; if used now, it has primarily historical and often negative associations." (Fikentscher 2000:11)

So far, this discussion has been focused more towards musical categories as represented by style. Style is positioned closer to the sound of the music, how it is played and recorded. In his article "Style and Genre as a Mode of Aesthetics", Moore describes style as "…the musical experience viewed as resulting from a creative act…" (Moore 2009:2) In example, a virtuoso rock style guitar solo could be played within a pop or R&B track, like Eddie Van Halen's solo in Michael Jackson's "Beat It". Genre, on the other hand includes a more elaborate idea of the music as defined by the industry, the broadcasting systems, retail, consumers and so forth. Moore describes genre as "…the intention to create a particular kind of (musical) experience – a 'what'." (ibid.)

I would now like to go into matters concerning how the creative process of Chic was organized. As a comparative framework, I will draw on the work of Jon Fitzgerald. His examination of the creative processes taking place within the Motown

production apparatus bears a resemblance to that of Chic in crucial areas. The reason for this choice of comparative material is twofold. First, the dynamics of the process taking place between initial idea and finished product bears similarities in vital areas. The similarity is most striking in the case of Holland-Dozier-Holland, in that they acted as both songwriters, arrangers and producers of the sessions. Secondly, the creative process involves constant rewriting and rearranging through the production of the track. In other words, the track gets written partially as it is transferred to tape in the studio. Starting at the tail end of this discussion, I will now go into a discussion on the importance of the session band the creative setting where the tracks are being developed as they are being recorded.

2.2. Session bands

Before going into a more specific discussion on the music of Chic, I would like to investigate the role of the session musician and the session band. Both Edwards and Rodgers came from a session musician background, thus the need to look at the specifics of this particular "breed" of musicians.

Hired by either producers a studio or artists, session musicians provide accompaniment for recording and touring artists. As a result of the short-term nature of such work, an important feature of a session player is the ability to adapt to a range of different musical settings. An important distinction here is the difference between the session musician and the studio musician. As the latter term implies, these are musicians typically on a running contract with a certain studio such as Motown or Stax.

Being subjected to the constant pressure of landing the next gig, the session musician is dependent upon his/hers ability to read and interpret new material quickly without extensive preparation. Also, the session musicians are often expected to come up with parts on the basis of simple "head arrangements". Such arrangements often describe the basic melody, structure, key, style and harmonic framework. Based on this basic information, the session musician is called upon to provide a distinct instrumental part.

An important factor in investigating the work of session musicians is to look at the demands of the period in which the recordings were made.

In the case of Edwards and Rodgers, their formative years took place in an era where near flawless performance was of the essence, as a premise of landing the next “gig”. In absence of the editing tools later introduced through digital recording, a “clean” take was essential. The point I am making here is that the session background provides a certain scope on how to make records, a focus on performing in a recorded format. As Albin Zak III describes: "And once again, it is not their playing style but their recording style they are known for: a combination of performance elements - rhythmic feel, tone quality and so forth - and the actual sounds that contribute to the ‘voice’ of a record." (Zak 2001:51) Taking this into account, I will argue that the musicianship of the members of Chic is at the core of how their specific style was created.

As briefly mentioned above, Motown was one of the record labels that employed a steady roster of staff musicians. In his article "Motown Crossover Hits 1963-1966 and the Creative Process"(1995) and the following article "Black Pop Songwriting 1963-1966: An Analysis of U.S. Top Forty Hits by Cooke, Mayfield, Stevenson, Robinson and Holland, Dozier, Holland" (2007), Jon Fitzgerald emphasizes the role of the session band as a key ingredient in the crafting of successful recorded tracks. The parallels between the way the productions were run at Motown bears several resembling features to that of Chic, as to the importance of the musicians input on the end result. One is the element of having a jazz background, a fact that Nile Rodgers often highlights as a key factor in the way he approaches his songwriting process. Another important feature that connects the two cases is the way both the songwriting and the production work is carried through by the same personnel, a labor division also exemplified through the “Brill Building” songwriter teams (Fitzgerald 2007:97-98). In the case of Motown, both the production itself and the creative work involved in coming up with tracks was very much dependent of the musicians, as well as the songwriting/producer team. As Fitzgerald explains: "Session players, following minimal directions, would create grooves that became the building blocks for often undefined songs." (Fitzgerald 1995:3) Through the analysis following this statement, Fitzgerald highlights the importance of investigating the stylistic

background of the musicians. In the case of Motown, the main source of origin is found in the gospel tradition. Several key elements are pointed out as being translated from this particular style of church music into the recording facilities at Motown studios. Of the elements mentioned is rhythm "The rhythm, the rhythmic element of these gospel songs is almost a predominant one. Syncopation is described as a 'very characteristic idiom'..." (Fitzgerald 1995:4, quoting Crawford 1977:555) Further elements include a wide field of musical characteristics, "...call-response, melismatic melodies, varied and expressive vocal tone, vocal dexterity, melodic variation and improvisation, repetition, percussive playing techniques, hand-clapping and foot patting, use of piano and tambourine." (Fitzgerald 1995:4, quoting Marsh 1989:497; Williams-Jones 1975; Maultsby 1992)

So, the background of the actual players performing the music was all-important as to the outcome of the production process in the case of Motown.[18] In Chic, diversity is the term I would choose to describe the collection of musicians involved. As already mentioned, Rodgers background was primarily rooted in the jazz tradition. In Easlea, a description is offered of how Rodgers adapted his playing style to fit in a pop context. The first step was trading his Gibson Barney Kessel Model guitar with a Fender Stratocaster. These two guitars can be said to represent total opposites within the sonic realm of the electric guitar. The Gibson is a completely hollow guitar, along the lines of an acoustic guitar. It has "humbucking" pickups/microphones and a wooden bridge, yielding a mellow rounded sound with a focus on the mid and low end of the frequency spectrum. The Stratocaster, with its single coil pickups, string through bridge and a solid wood body provides a distinctly bright sound with a more pronounced attack to the note. This is, of course, a very limited description as to the differences between these guitars. However, for the purpose of this discussion, I find these characteristics the most vital as to what the change signifies. Bernard Edwards, who introduced Rodgers to the "chucking" style of rhythm guitar playing, encouraged this change of instrument. I will go into this technique in more detail within the analysis of Bowie's "Let's Dance". In short, this

[18] This is also noted briefly in my discussion on the term "sound", in the context of Bowman's discussion on Stax (1995)

style is based on a choppy style of rhythm playing, accentuating the attack of the notes while dampening the decay.

> Rodgers listened [to Edwards' demonstration] and wondered how he could adapt that style, given his knowledge of harmony; if he could blend a choppy rhythm style with all of his McCoy Tyner influences, he would be on to something. It would need practice, but it could be a fantastic update on the sound Jimmy "Chank" Nolen had achieved with James Brown. (Easlea 2004:63)[19]

Bernard Edwards came from a background of backing R&B artists in the late 60´s and early 70's. Edwards playing style leans on creating bass lines rather than simply stating the root of the chord. There is little information as to the inspiration leading Edwards onto this style, but the R&B backing band background is a probable cause to this preference. Examples of this style of bass playing are Donald "Duck" Dunn (Stax) and James Jamerson (Motown). A key characteristic of the Edwards style of playing is his use of the upper register of the bass as well as the bottom. His bass lines often span a large register. Listening to "Everybody Dance" provides a prime example of this trait in his approach on the bass guitar. Besides this variation in register, rhythmic variation often occurs in his lines. Again, "Everybody Dance" provides a showcase example in the intro of the track

Rodgers describes the interplay between the guitar and bass that was to become a key ingredient in the "Chic sound" as a result of the two musicians recreating a "dense" and "overproduced" sound live on stage when backing vocalist Carol Douglas. As Rodgers explains in Easlea (2004):

> We had to turn those big orchestral dance records into something that live audiences would appreciate. I would superimpose my whole rhythmical concept on it and rewrite parts so they could have more of a groove. When I played my style in someone else's song, they always liked it better. I played the rhythm and the line at the same time; it grooved in a different way. Bernard and I made the rhythm section sound like the record. If it was just me, Bernard and the drummer - instead of sounding like the Band of Gypsies, we sounded like the record. It wasn't just a random thing. He would take the bass line from the record and play it as well as the embellishments of the other instruments'." (Easlea 2004:71)

Contrasting the two bandleaders/initiators, both Rob Sabino (keyboards) and Tony Thompson (drums) came from a background rooted mainly in rock (ibid.:72-76).

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[19] : An interesting paradox is that "Chank" Nolen favored Gibson guitars, the ES175 and the ES5, close relatives of the Gibson Barney Kessel originally played by Rodgers

Although the contributions of these two players should not be diminished in any way, I will not go into a detailed analysis of their style of playing due to a limited amount of detail appearing in the literature.

Besides the musical qualities associated with the session band, there is one other aspect that I would like to put forward, that is the absence of faces. In other words, the session bands by default are in most instances meant to remain obscured to the audience. They do receive some recognition, often voiced by other musicians recognizing their impact. An example is found in Frith quoting bassist John Entwistle of The Who "I didn't know it was James Jamerson. I just called him the guy who played bass for Motown, but along with every other bassist in England, I was trying to learn what he was doing." (Entwistle, quoted in, Frith 1996:55) Remaining obscure off stage was the result of a conscious choice when Rodgers conceived the concept of Chic. As he describes in his biography: "We didn't look like our music. The labels all loved us until they saw us. We weren't stars – but our music was!" (Rodgers 2011:121) They decided, inspired by Kiss, to construct a "faceless" image. Roxy Music also inspired this choice.[20] "KISS's onstage characters were faceless offstage. *Faceless.* Check! We could do that." (ibid.) The lack of public notoriety meant the session band that formed the core of Chic productions could also back other artists, without the risk of compromising their own brand, so to speak. An example of this is how the Chic Organization wrote, performed and produced Sister Sledge. Even though the production is heavily influenced by the sound developed within Chic, there was no doubt as to the fact that it was a Sister Sledge record. I will return to this specific musical example shortly.

2.3. Chic on record

Through this section, I will address issues related to the craft of composing popular music. As Albin Zak III argues, the transition that has occurred in popular music with the advent of recording technology introduces a similarity in concept to that of the

[20] A happenstance event led to Rodgers being "stranded" in London, which led to his discovery of Roxy Music (Rodgers 2011:116-118).

western classical tradition. "Though they differ, both practically and conceptually, in their respective means of materializing the musical work, they share the aim of giving permanent, objectified form to musical relationships." (Zak 2001:38) Though Zak in this instance refers to rock specifically, it is equally relevant to other fields of popular music.

I would now like to investigate how the popular music composer operates. In doing this, my aim is to look at how this professional is able to adapt his or her voice as a writer in order to create songs that make good tracks. As I have mentioned earlier in my discussion on terminology with reference to Zak (2001), the differentiation of songs and tracks provides clarity in the distinction between the initial ideas conceived by a songwriter as opposed to the final recording of the song. Filling the roles of songwriter, producer and artist, Nile Rodgers navigates all the spaces within the process from idea, writing, performing, recording and producing. On one hand, this omnipresent power provides him with total control of the materialization of his work. On the other, it provides a challenge in being able to remain critical to the decisions being made. Even though a song might have a grand potential, it is left to the interpretation captured in the final track to transform this potential into a chart-topping hit. In his article "Hits and Misses: crafting a pop single for the top-40 market in the 1960s", Robert Toft provides an example of the key importance of "post-songwriting" decisions. Using the song "(They Long to Be) Close to You as the case of study, Toft shows how the version produced by songwriter Burt Bacharach did not manage to materialize the potential of the song. The premise of Toft's investigations lies in the fact that the song was released several times before it became an actual hit single. As Toft writes:

> ... when a producer like Burt Bacharach recorded one of his songs with more than one artist and worked from the same basic arrangement each time, the recordings themselves reveal the ways in which the musical material has been altered in an effort to capture that elusive hit. (Toft 2010:269)

Relating this to the work of Nile Rodgers, this stresses the importance of being able to provide the right arrangement of production of a song when running a "one man show".

What is highlighted in Toft's article the importance of being able to voice the song through the writing and recording process, so that it translates into an appealing end result. I will now look specifically into this process the work of Chic, in order to highlight how Rodgers accomplished this. As a framework through this segment of the text, I have chosen to focus mainly on the first two albums *Chic* and *C'est Chic*. In the context of Chic, I will start by addressing the collaborative nature of this project. Ascribing the success of Chic solely to Rodgers would be a case of severe falsification, as the tracks were generally made in collaboration with bassist Bernard Edwards. My accounts in this matter will be based on how it is described by Rodgers through his autobiography, *Nile Rodgers Le Freak - An Upside Down Story of Family, Disco and Destiny* (2011).

A first thing to note is how Chic utilized a lineup of vocalists rather than placing the spotlight on one key figure in the group. As a consequence, the group was able to cope with shifting personnel without sacrificing what could be described as the Chic "brand". Musically, having a diverse lineup of vocalists readily available within the group allowed the songwriting and production team of Edwards/Rodgers to adapt the expressive element provided by the vocals to fit each individual track. In other words, they could project the vocal content through either male, female or an ensemble voice in order to highlight the message put forward in their tracks. Though this might suggest an element of fragmentation, I will argue that that is not the case. Even though the vocals vary from track to track, specific traits can be identified as forming a recognizable sound on record.

Listening to the namesake debut album, a variety of vocal configurations are put forward. Starting with the track "Dance, Dance, Dance (yowsah, yowsah, yowsah)", the main vocal hook utilizes the ensemble to emphasize a communal encouragement to dance found in the lyrics. Through the verse, the scene is shifted to the personal sphere of two female dancers. Besides this shift in persona, the musical and lyrical phrasing provides additional distance between the individual parts of the song. While the introductory ensemble vocals feature elongated phrases, the verse has a more abrupt hectic quality. The latter evokes the idea of the utterance coming *from* the dancers on the floor, catching their breath between the phrases.

Using different voices to provide both musical contrast and shift in context as an arrangement device appears frequently throughout the album. In the track "You Can Get By" the contrasting vocals are emphasized clearly. Again, the vocal intro is put forward an ensemble of voices, while the verse introduces a solo male voice. Following the same formula, "Everybody Dance" is yet another example of this ensemble intro/hook followed by a solo voice for the more lyrically dense verse. There is also commonly a shift in the level of intimacy evoked by the vocals, moving between a communal encouragement through the chorus and a higher level of intimacy through the verse. Using the term “formula” in this context points at the similarity found in the buildup of the tracks. How this formula is applied does vary from song to song, as the examples show. Put differently, the formula does not necessarily suggest uniform results. Listening to the examples above, each has a distinctly different persona delivering the words; the dancers of "Dance, Dance, Dance", the reassuring (although slightly disturbing) man of "You Can Get By" and the disco diva of "Everybody Dance" are all voices of their own.

The main ballad of the album reveals an entirely different approach, as it does not show any traits of the formula discussed above. "Falling in Love with You" voices the thoughts of the singer, rather than the conversational mode found in the previous examples. This calls for a different set of writing, arranging and production devices to support the intimacy contained in the lyrics.

Following a similar recipe to that of the *Chic* album, the sophomore album *C'est Chic* emphasizes up-tempo dance tracks supplemented by two instrumental tracks and a slow ballad as elements of variation. Another common trait is the use of the ensemble vocals in the opening presentation, followed by a contrasting lead for the verse.

In describing the formula of making Chic tracks, Rodgers refers to this as Deep Hidden Meaning - DHM. The way he describes this in his autobiography, it comes across as a somewhat elusive concept.

> We called it DHM or Deep Hidden Meaning. Our golden rule was that all our songs had to have this ingredient. In short, it meant understanding the song's DNA and seeing it from many different angles. Art is subjective, but if we knew what we were talking about, then we could relay it to others while maintaining its essential truth. (Rodgers 2011:115)

Interpreting this statement by Rodgers brings me back to Toft's article of "Hits and Misses" and the importance of finding the right arrangement if each track. The DHM concept seems to act as a compass in the development of the track leading into the final recorded material. In later references to the DHM concept in his autobiography (Rodgers 2011:118,129,138,144-145), Rodgers seems to be focusing mainly on the lyrics as the vantage point between the concept and the song. None of the instances mentioning DHM involves explicit musical references. The closest he gets is in describing the Sister Sledge album *We Are Family*. Rodgers refers to the album as an "example of DHM perfection", in that the writer/production team managed to convey who the artists were, and what they were about through their production (ibid.:147). As I will discuss in my analysis of this particular Sister Sledge track (see chapter two), the aesthetic choices made in the production of the track shows a different approach than that of *C'est Chic*. The reason for using *C'est Chic* as a reference in my analysis of “We are Family” is the fact that the two albums were made side by side, using the same studio and many of the same musicians.[21]

2.4. Vocal timbre

So far, I've concentrated mainly on describing the use of vocals as an arrangement device. This may in other words be described as investigating the vocals as a part of the instrumentation. I would now like to focus on timbre and production in a vocal-specific context. As of my view, the timbral qualities need to be addressed as a part of the construct of any recorded track because.

Given the subjective nature of both timbre and production as analytic parameters, I will clarify my interpretation briefly. The term “timbre” is often used to describe a certain quality of a sound, sometimes described as tone color. In an everyday situation, timbre could be explained as the content of a sound that

[21] This again bears resemblance to the description of the Motown and early Stax recordings, as mentioned in the introduction of this text.

distinguishes it from other sounds, i.e. the difference between a saxophone and a guitar.

This corresponds to the etymological definition of the word, which in French describes tone quality or tone color of a sound. Other definitions follow in the vein of the one given above with reference to the sax and guitar (Rossing, Moore, Wheeler 2002:135). However, explanations through the use of etymology often provide little insight to what the term actually contains. Rossing, Moore and Wheeler divide what they call "subjective attributes of sound" into "Four attributes".

> Four attributes are frequently used to describe sound, especially musical sound. They are loudness, pitch, timbre and duration. Each of these subjective qualities depends on one or more physical measures that can be measured. Loudness, for example, depends mainly on sound pressure but also on the spectrum of partials, the physical duration, etc. Pitch depends mainly on frequency but also show less dependence on sound pressure, envelope, etc. Timbre is a sort of catchall, including all those attributes that serve to distinguish sounds with the same pitch and loudness. (ibid. :94)

Following this introduction, a table illustrating the dependence of subjective qualities to physical parameters further illustrates the ambiguous nature of the timbral element.[22] The other three parameters are linked to one chief physical parameter out of a total of five and they are only to some extent dependent of other parameters. Timbre shows moderate dependency both on frequency and envelope. Besides it is the chief parameter of spectrum.[23]

The discussions above can be taken as indications of the vast complexity that is contained in sounds on records. Even though the concept of timbre is, as we have seen, both ambiguous and complex, it is still a quality in recordings that most listeners can relate to directly upon exposure. Combined with the technological possibilities presented by the record studio, the outcome of a recorded voice can go in a near infinite number of directions. The production element can, in the context of the discussion above, be regarded as involving all the categories listed in Rossing, Moore and Wheeler (2002), including timbre.

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[22] For visual reference, see Rossing, Moore and Wheeler 2002:95

[23] The definition of spectrum found in glossary, Rossing, Moore and Wheeler (2002): a "recipe" that gives the frequency of each component of a complex vibration.

It should be noted that the production elements I will be discussing are the ones represented as sounding elements in the recording. This might seem to be a blunt statement, but the conditions under which the production took place also have an effect on the material caught on tape (or disc in the post-digital age). One famous example of an album where the conditions surrounding the recording are as notorious as the recording itself is *Rumors* by Fleetwood Mac, with its stories of breakups and personal conflict. I will return to this in my analysis of "We Are Family", in describing the approach used by Edwards/Rodgers when recording vocalists.

Leading the discussion in the direction of my main case of study, Nile Rodgers, I would like to start with a couple of quotes from Easlea describing Chic's debut album to reveal how issues of timbre are discussed through adjectives supplied by music critics.

> Already, Chic sounded different. The vocals were detached and striking, having little of the warmth and passion of other R&B acts. Critic Peter Shapiro has gone as far as to suggest that the title phrase of "Dance, Dance, Dance" is intoned by the vocalists like "deer caught in the headlights". (Easlea 2004:93-94)

Being subjected to adjectives such as these, detached, striking, warmth and so forth appear to me as an interesting point of reference when trying to describe what characterizes the vocal sound of Chic. The first step of my approach will consist of a qualitative interpretation of elements subscribing to the timbral and production aspects that I have discussed in the introductory text. I will draw on examples of vocal timbre and production from groups and artists associated with this genre as a comparison.

As mentioned previously, the ensemble vocal is a frequently reoccurring arrangement device used to achieve a certain timbral effect. A clue to how the specific timbre heard on Chic records is revealed by Easlea, "The vocals were layered with as many as six or seven singers in the background doing as many as four overdubs." (Easlea 2004:94) So, how does the use of overdubs and layering affect the timbre of the collective sound? In the following, "layering" means different vocalists singing the same basic tonal material, while overdubs describe one vocalist doing several takes duplicating him/herself.

By default of nature different vocalists exhibit different timbral characteristics in their voices. Layering will have the effect of making the overall timbre thicker in the sense of comprising a compound timbre. Also, slight differences in the envelope[24] of the sound produced will further broaden the sound, due to slight variations in onset attack and duration of each note. This last characteristic also applies to the effect of overdubs, stemming from the notion that a vocalist always inflicts some variation between each take, even when repeating their own efforts. Another consideration worth noting is how the voices are distributed in terms of pitch. A male voice singing in the same register as a female voice, either falsetto or chest voice, will in most cases have a different timbre than that of a female voice.

The use of choir in the first two Chic recordings show a clear preference of the unison and octave voicing, as opposed to using the choir as a harmonic unit. In "Dance, Dance, Dance", the choir only breaks out of the strict unison on the word “dancing”. Also, the voices are all placed in the same register creating what can be heard as one big, “supernatural voice”. Although hearing each voice individually requires close attention, there is little doubt that there are several voices present. The plurality is exposed only briefly in the mentioned emphasis on heard on “dan-cing”, and only once. On "Everybody Dance", the voicing of the choir is done slightly different, in that the voices are spread out through different registers/octaves.

An effect of this disposition is that the choir appears less ambiguous, as a more distinct division between the male and female voices is clearly audible. "Est-ce que C'est Chic" provides yet another take on the unison/octave choir approach. Placing the voices in a lower register than the two preceding examples seems to introduce a sound akin of a conversation, as the voices operate in what could be expected of a spoken voice.

Through the *C'est Chic* album, much of the same characteristics apply to how the choir vocals are used. There are of course slight variations occurring, but in this context of the choir voicing as an arrangement device, I would argue that it stays within the definitions exemplified by the tracks already mentioned.

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[24] Definition of envelope in glossary, Rossing Moore and Wheeler: “Time variation of the amplitude or energy of a vibration” Rossing, Moore and Wheeler 2002:36

Besides mere arrangement, the doubling of voices in unison and octaves has a pronounced effect on the sonic portion of the sound. As already mentioned, the blurring of attack and duration is a significant factor as to how the sound is affected. Another equally prominent feature of this particular arrangement/production device is the effect it imposes due to slight variations in pitch. To exemplify, one could throw a glimpse at how compound sounds are created through use of analog synthesizers. Simply put, a common way of "fattening" the sound of an analog synthesizer is to set up a pair (or more) of oscillators to produce two identical sound waves/waveforms, and by slightly detuning one of the oscillators a more lively sound is produced as a result. In the same way, two voices singing the same pitch will through slight variation between the voices create a timbre that differs from that of a singular voice.[25]

To sum up what I have discussed so far on the use of ensemble vocals/choir in the first two records made by Chic, a key observation is how Edwards/Rodgers show a tendency of limiting the spread of one singular element in order to achieve a high degree of separation within the sonic spectrum of the production.

2.5. The Chic Choir

The solo lead vocals, often synonymous with the vocal melody heard through the verses of Chic tracks, are generally more subdued than the hooks sung by the choir. However, though there are tendencies like this, the most striking characteristic about the Chic albums is their multiplicity of voices. Varying dramatically from one track to another, how does this affect the communication of identity?

The lack of star-persona visually complicate matters even more, as it makes the task of assigning the message of the vocals to an embodied persona. Could it be then, that what is heard is the "voice" of the composer speaking through different tongues? Frith raises questions concerning these matters, asking simply: "whose 'voice' is there?

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[25] These effects can also be produced through studio manipulation through various permutations of time-based effects such as phasing, flanging and chorusing. For a more elaborate discussion on this subject, see Zak 2001 p. 71-72.

Who's talking?" (Frith 1996:183) In the language of classical music criticism, Frith describes the emphasis on the composer. The words and the voice singing thus become secondary to the music of the composer. "... a Schubert song is a Schubert song, regardless of whose words he has set to the music and which singer who is singing them." (ibid.:184) This approach highlights the romantic image of the composer as the *master,* focusing on the autonomy of the musical work. Zak addresses this problem in his discussion on the compositional process in rock, "In this ideological climate[26] the idea developed that a musical composition was an autonomous entity whose meaning was contained entirely within itself." (Zak 2001:39)

Even though popular musicology since long has shunned the thought of an autonomous idea of "the work", Frith argues that a similar set of questions still remain concerning the relationships between song, composer, the voice in popular music (ibid.:185). In this setting, an ensemble of multiple vocalists sets up a scenario in need of special attention. Frith points out two main directions of possible outcomes of a group voice setting. Setting up a dichotomy between male and female groups (Frith admits to this division as being a somewhat exaggerated and arbitrary division). The group is either in acting as a co-operative, downplaying individuality. On the other hand, female groups can be heard exhibiting a more conversational approach, backing each other up, commenting on the lead voice in a number of different ways (Frith 1996:201).

The way the vocals appear through the tracks of the first two Chic albums, the vocals are usually not intensely present. Instead of presenting a strong melody that highlights the persona of the singer, the vocals appear as a part of the groove. Using a three dimensional metaphor, as found in Moore's "sound box",[27] one way of verbalizing this effect is that the vocals are not placed in the foreground. This is very often the case with earlier soul and R&B such as the mentioned Motown and Stax recordings. Stan Hawkins approaches the lyrics of Madonna in a way that I see as relative to my discussion. "When we surrender to the beat, verbal meaning becomes

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[26] Referring to 19th century writer and composer E.T.A. Hoffman (Zak 2001:39)

[27] Moore (2001), p. 121. More on the specifics of this model will be discussed through chapter three of this thesis.

an accessory, rather than a main focus." (Hawkins 2002:40) So, the vocals are by all means important as a part of the arrangement, but they do not necessarily serve as the main point of focus through the tracks. An exception is, of course, the ballads. In these tracks, i.e. "At Last I Am Free", the vocals are put forward as the main point of focus. Robert Walser makes a similar observation in his article on Earth, Wind & Fire, in how the lyrics are not necessarily picked up on through a literary interpretation. The discussion Walser raises is then a matter of literal signification versus signification found in the overall sound of the music itself. In this equation, Walser points at a tendency of reading the lyrics as the "true" meaning: "It shouldn't be surprising that people would prefer to experience these things[28] rather than the cynical sentiments sketched by the lyrics, but it does remind us that we often too easily equate meaning with language." (Walser 2004:267) As I will argue through my analysis of the "outside" productions made by The Chic Organization Inc.[29], the way the vocals were integrated as a groove element was transferred to other artists as well. Both "We Are Family" by Sister Sledge and "Upside Down" by Diana Ross have a strong rhythmic emphasis in their main hooks. This is not to say that the lyrics found in Chic are not significant. Earlier in this chapter, I have given a description of the DHM concept of songwriting. One way of interpreting this concept is that the lyrical content is as much a writer's tool, providing an inspiration as to what the music is to communicate. An example of this dynamic is the vocal hook of the Chic hit "Le Freak". Originally titled "Fuck Off", then changed for obvious reasons, the track is about Studio 54. Written during an impromptu jam session, the words to the song came quickly, according to Rodgers. They were trying to get the same rhythmic punch of "Fuck Off!", but in a language fit for the mass market. Changing it around, their first substitution was "Freak off". They decided that didn't work, so the next suggestion was "Freak Out!". This phrase worked rhythmically, and it supplied a reference to "The Freak", which was a style of dance performed at Studio 54 (Rodgers

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[28] This refers to the following statement "…listeners aren't analyzing poetry, they're identifying with the music's rich sensuousness, the passion, vulnerability, and earnestness of Bailey's voice…" (Walser 2004:267)

[29] The formal/legal name of the Edwards/Rodgers writing and production team.

2011:137-138). Combined with a strong rhythmic phrasing landing on the first beat of the bar for the "out!", the lyrics are important to the rhythmic phrasing of the hook. Even though they don't necessarily make much sense, the words are important as vocal sounds.

2.6. Summary

With the success of Chic, Nile Rodgers secured his position as a hit maker. Besides putting him in the spotlight, this was the period in which his signature sound was developed. Through this chapter, my goal has been to provide insight into what influenced Rodgers through this highly formative period of his career. Perhaps the most important point made is how Rodgers, through his experience as a session player developed a specific approach to making records. As with the description of Motown provided by Fitzgerald, the Rodgers sound is tightly connected to the playing styles of the musicians involved. In the extension of this point, a preference towards using few elements is consistent throughout the tracks I have focused on so far. The basic lineup is the four-piece band including guitar, bass, drums and keyboards. On top of this, what Rodgers refers to as "sweetening",[30] is added. This "sweetening" refers to strings and/or a horn section for the most part. The simplicity of Rodgers rhythm section concept provides a robust platform, allowing him and the band to accommodate a wide range of artistic expressions. This subject will be investigated further in the next chapter.

[30] Rodgers uses the term "sweetening" in the context of the "Dance, Dance, Dance" arrangement (Rodgers 2011:128).

Chapter Three - Outside Chic

"Um. Excuse Diana, I think you are singing a little under the track"

– Bernard Edwards

Through this chapter I will go into a more detailed investigation of the productions that were made involving artists outside Chic. As an introduction to this I will raise a discussion on the role of the producer. Although this issue has been touched upon in the previous chapters, I see the need of a more in-depth discussion. Following this, I will present an analysis of three selected tracks. In contrast to chapter two, these analyses will contain a higher level of detail in terms of the sonic presentation.

3.1. Star Producer, Producer Star

With the emergence of the recording studio as a place of creativity, the influence of the producer as a creative contributor becomes of interest. My goal through this chapter is attempting to trace the influence the producer has on the music being made. Since the process of making records involves a mass amount of individuals which all can be counted as suspects in influencing the outcome of the process, I see the need to explore different methods to approach this goal.

As an introduction, I will make a brief summary on what I regard as important steps in the development of recording technology. The purpose of this is to show how the recording studio went from a place where music was simply recorded, to a place where music is made. Serge Lacasse describes the shift in status:

> First thought of as a means of registering and storing sound, recording techniques gradually became creative tools in their own right, this process changing, in turn, our perception of engineers and producers from the status of "technician" to that of "artist". (Lacasse 2000:15)

Against the backdrop of new sounds coming from within the recording studios, interest in the originators of these sounds brought the names of producers into the limelight.

Within popular musicology, a tradition involving interpretive investigations into the sound of pop and rock records has been present ever since the eighties. Some involve investigations of the work of specific producers, as with Timothy Warner's writings on Trevor Horn (2003). Doing an in-depth study of a single producer, it acknowledges the importance of the producer as a vital participant in the creative process of pop record making. In this chapter, I will draw on the findings of Warner comparing it to other approaches with similar points of interest.

In the very earliest days of recording, the main function of recording was simply to document a live performance. Even though the sound quality of early records was limited both by means of recording and reproducing sound, the record ended up as the new commercial paradigm of the music industry.[31] Before the record, sheet music publishing and traveling shows were the main channels of distribution outside major cities in the USA. Through these infant years of sound recording, however, the recording process itself did not play out as a creative process. As I mentioned earlier, it was simply a means of capturing a live performance for mechanical reproduction through the "talking machine".

The introduction of the magnetic tape in 1949 brought a new paradigm shift in the business of making. Greatly reducing the cost of setting up a studio, this allowed smaller studios to enter the business (Toynbee 2000:80). Toynbee argues that this changed the nature of the recording industry, towards a more "decentralized music-making culture." (ibid.) This shift, Toynbee writes, gave way to new independent record labels, which was of key importance in the early years of rock n´roll.

The sound of early Elvis Presley recordings reveals an important point of interest. Sam Phillips emerges as something more than an anonymous name on the record sleeve, and the sound of Sun Studios became a sonic marker connected to the music known as rock n´roll. I will go into more detail on the specifics of the Sun Studios sound later in this chapter.

The plot thickens as Lester Polfus, better known as Les Paul, pioneers the development of what is to become the multi track recording. The multi track

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[31] Spawning the recording industry

introduces the possibility of overdubs, enabling sounds previously impossible. Furthermore, new sounds could now be made that simply could not have happened through live performance. Through this development, songwriting and the arrangement of a song now extend into the recording process, with decisions being made continuously through the entire process. Even after the last bit of sound has reached its place of storage, disk or tape, there are still vast amounts of room to experiment with song structure, omitting instrumental parts, changing the sonic spectrum through sound processing and so on. Discussions following the release of the album *Graceland* by Paul Simon serve as an example on how sounds are recorded and imported into the studio as raw material, then being molded a pop song. Engineer Roy Hallee describe the making of the songs as jam sessions being shaped into the songs we hear on the record (*Classic Albums, Paul Simon, Graceland* 1997:7.28-7.42). Songs are created *through* the process of recording itself, with the producer at its centre. Still, the answer to what is the role of the producer remains blurry and highly fluid.

As mentioned previously in chapter one, Zak suggests dividing the final product into layers, the song, the musical arrangement and the track (Zak 2001:24). This is done in order to differentiate the inner workings of a record production.

> The song is what can be represented on a lead sheet; it usually includes words, melody, chord changes, and some degree of formal design. The arrangement is a particular musical setting of the song. It provides a more detailed prescriptive plan: instrumentation, musical parts, rhythmic groove, and so forth. The track is the recording itself. (ibid.)

By extracting the contents of each layer, one might find indications to how the final result was reached. As Zak exemplifies through statements from a variety of producers, the approaches vary through 180 degrees. On one side, Rick Rubin states that most of his "secret" rest within the pre-production. Steve Lillywhite and John Leckie argue the opposite; the tracks are made during the course of the studio process. Judging from these short statements, one might argue that Rubin represent a more documentary rooted approach to the studio. In other words, the performance is honed to a near finished state prior to going into the studio. Lillywhite and Leckie prefer a more "skeletal" approach, so to speak, using the studio to build the body of the song. Both these approaches, and the middle ground between them, reveal the status of the producer as a creative contributor through the process of making records.

Timothy Warner raises a discussion, which pursues a similar set of problem areas to those I am trying to point out. He specifically deals with the role of the record producer, making several observations I would like to discuss. As a starting point, he refers to the producer as a key figure in joining pop music and technology: "A fundamental aspect of the relationship between technology an pop music is embodied in the record producer, who oversees the production process in the recording studio." (Warner 2003:33)

Such a definition gives some information as to the role of the producer, although overseeing the recording process does not reveal the role of the producer in any detail. This is recognized by Warner, which consequently explains a string of responsibilities that are associated with the producer. As it turns out, the range of tasks contains a broad spectrum of vastly different work disciplines. These include the financial management of the project, answering to the record company executives interested in maximizing profit. Hiring musicians and other external contributors such as engineers and so forth falls within this category (Warner 2003:34). Managing the legal documents related to the expenses is also at the producers' desk. Warner then turns towards the work being done in the studio.

> While the ability to manage money, understand legal documents, work successfully with a range of people and predict potential success is a prerequisite of the record producer, their work mostly take place in the recording studio and is predominately of an artistic and creative nature. (ibid.:35)

Within the discussion concerning the creative role of the producer, Warner suggests that assigning elements in the final recording to a specific contributor is, as he states, "virtually impossible" (ibid.). As the methods vary from producer to producer, my opinion is that in certain cases there are traits of a recording that can be credited to a certain individual contributor, through investigating sources in closely connected to the chosen recording.

In the context of a studio or record company such as Stax or Motown, the list of contributors often stays the same on the recordings of a range of artists. Steve Waksman explains in his article "California Noise: Tinkering with Hardcore and Heavy Metal in Southern California":

> Indeed, recording studios have often been considered to have signature sounds; records produced at Sun studio in Memphis (TN), Motown in Detroit (IL, or RCA's studio B in Nashville (TN), are all considered to bear the trace of a unique combination of spatial detail,

> technological specification, and the contribution of a distinctive core of studio musicians. (Waksman 2004:688)

Elaborating on this is Rob Bowman's research on the Stax sound. In his article on "The Stax Sound" he pays close attention to the members of the production chain at this particular studio. I have already mentioned this article in the discussion of the "sound" term, but there are further aspects of Bowman's method I would like to adopt. Of particular interest to my project is the way Bowman device his categories of study. Bowman explains this division as follows:

> In attempting a musical exegesis of the "Stax sound", nine basic areas of enquiry will be looked at: instrumentation; repertoire; structure; keys; aspects of harmonic construction; aspects of time including tempo, pulse and the organization in time of the vocalists, the horns, drum patterns, bass lines and chordal instruments; melodic construction; ornamentation; and timbre/production considerations. (Bowman 1995:289)

My analysis will not be divided in as rigid a system as what is found in Bowman's text. As this model is based on a statistic analysis of a large body of tracks to find certain elements as essential, I will not have the sufficient amount of data to feed into the analysis. However, the value of having these categories in mind when analyzing a smaller amount of tracks does provide some guidance as to "what to listen for".

Warner states in his conclusion, his focus is on "…the relationship between technology and creativity." (Warner 2003:139) In the case of Trevor Horn, weighting the study towards technology seems appropriate. As of my interpretation of Warner, he sees the methods on which Horn based the productions intimately connected with the technology available at that particular moment in time. In dealing with the "virtually impossible" task of pinpointing the creative contributions of Trevor Horn, Warner coins several terms corresponding to sounding features. This point picks up on my discussion on the terminological issues surrounding the use the term "sound".

To further exemplify the diversity of how "sound" is used, one can see how different producers have been accredited the honor of having a signature sound linked to their name. Sam Phillips of Sun Studios holds his position as a key inventor of the Rock and Roll sound, pushed into fame by his affiliation with Elvis Presley – the King of Rock and Roll. In retrospect, the main ingredient in the sound created by Sam Phillips is often accredited to his use of the sound processing technology of the day. I'm referring to, more specifically, the use of artificial space through employing a

"slapback delay" (slap echo). This echo places the performance in an artificial acoustic environment, a different approach from catching a live performance as-is (or as-was). As Toynbee writes "In rock'n'roll the illusion involved the creation of a performance space that could never have existed without technological mediation" (Toynbee 2000:83). The result was a sound on record that was supernatural, or what one might call "hyperreal" with reference to Jean Beaudrillard.[32] Toynbee describes it as follows "The place we are taken to as we listen is emphatically *not* a concert hall, a bar, or lounge though. Rather this is a virtual architecture, one that is much 'larger than life' "(ibid.). So, how does the echo of Sun Studios become a familiar item, eventually becoming near normative to the sound of rock n´roll in the following years?[33] The transformation of the Sun Studios sound from supernatural to prototypical can be explained through what Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen calls processes of naturalization (Brøvig-Hanssen, Danielsen 2013:72). "What was at one point in time experienced as completely weird, supernatural or uncanny sonic environments might later be regarded as the very norm against which new uncanny sonic environments are measured." (ibid.)

Besides the point of the sound itself, the example of Sun Studios exemplifies how sensitive the use of the term "sound" can be. There were certainly other characteristics embedded in the early recordings of Elvis. Despite this, most of the literature written on the history of recorded music uses Sun Studios in discussions concerning the use of echo. Consequently, the understanding of "sound" when applied to Sun Studios in this context, it refers to basically one key parameter.

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[32] In discussing Beaudrillard's concept of the "hyperreal", Richard J. Lane describes it through the following example: "In example of the huge American cars of the 1950s, with massive "tail fins", the fins themselves represents speed, but in actuality are counterproductive in terms of drag and the real velocity attainable – the fins are thus representative of a fantasy of aerodynamics…" (Lane 2000:29) See Lane p. 29-31 for more details.
Another account of the term is found in Barker (2012): "Hyperreality: A reality by which the real is produced according to a model so that representations become more real than real. The distinction between real and a representation collapses or implodes. A simulation or artificial production of real life that executes its own world to constitute reality" (Barker 2012:503).

[33] The slapback echo is still a staple of certain genres such as Rockabilly

The presence of the producer star becomes truly explicit with the naming of George Martin as the "fifth Beatle". In search of describing features of the "sound" associated with the Beatles, the complexity is somewhat greater than that of Sun Studios. As Zak reveals, the process of writing and recording Beatles tracks, especially post-1966, was a studio exclusive endeavor. As the tracks were built in the studio, the influence of producer George Martin becomes more evident. Martin becomes a co-writer as well as producer, contributing signature parts, such as the string quartet arrangement on "Eleanor Rigby" (Zak 2001:34-36). This latter example shows how the impact of the producer *sometimes* involve musical tweaks rather than manipulating recordings through the use of technology. On the subject of the Beatles, both these parameters are clearly present - both the use of strings and other orchestral instruments, *and* the use of new technology or new use of existing technology.[34]

Boiling down both the example of Sun Studios and The Beatles, the definition of "sound" made in the introduction of the previously mentioned article by Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen seems to hit the mark pretty much dead-on. "In a musical context, the word 'sound' implies a set of sonic characteristics. Within popular music, this notion of sound sometimes supplies the very identity of a tune, a band or a musician." (Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen 2013:72) I am tempted to add the producer to this list, as they also often base their notoriety on a signature sound. What this definition supplies, is what I would describe as an open ended scope when discussing sound. Rather than limiting the reach to a certain set of parameters, as exemplified by Warner earlier, pointing towards sonic characteristics leave the definition open to a wide range of contributing elements.

Narrowing the subject matter towards the specifics of my analysis of productions featuring Nile Rodgers in the producers' chair, it becomes important to clarify where the emphasis needs to be in order to achieve an adequate level of precision and consistency. A key concept in the productions done by Rodgers is that he is also, along with Bernard Edwards, the songwriter, guitarist and arranger in addition to producing. As Zak describes: "Because a song need not be completely

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[34] As Toynbee writes, the multitrack technology existed for an extended period of time before its capability of nonsynchronous recording and post production editing was utilized in what can be described as a creative manner. (Toynbee2000:80-83)

finished until the final mix, songwriters who perform on and perhaps even produce their own records have a fluid situation in which to work." (Zak 2001:29)

In the tracks I have chosen to analyze, a clear distinction needs to be made between the tracks co-written/co-produced by Bernard Edwards and those accredited solely to Nile Rodgers. Following the success of Chic, other artists became interested in incorporating the Chic "sound". High profile acts like The Rolling Stones and Bette Midler were on the list of potential clients (Easlea 2004:134). Following this introduction, the question of what characterizes this sound leads into my analysis.

The tracks chosen are "We are Family" by Sister Sledge, "Upside Down" by Diana Ross and "Let's Dance" by David Bowie. I have chosen these three tracks because they represent different work environments, and because they each on their own are milestones in Rodgers' career.

"We are Family" was the first major hit produced by Rodgers outside of Chic. This project highlights Rodgers at the height of success with Chic, bursting with confidence and in total control of the process, the choice of act, writing and producing. Rodgers is quoted by Easlea stating "…point us to somebody in this building who is not a star and we will make them a star, no matter who it is, because we're going to mace the record and our rhythm section is the star, we'll just put whoever in it." (Rodgers, quoted in Easlea 2004:104)

"Upside Down" was the first production featuring a major star performer, Diana Ross. As with "We are Family", the track turned out to be a chart topping hit. The process however, had elements of drama and friction between producers and artist. Also, the Motown label had an influence on what was eventually released on record. I will elaborate on this in the analysis of the track.

"Let's Dance" reveals yet another facet of Rodgers work. As with Diana Ross, David Bowie represents a star performer with considerable success to his name. At the time the collaboration came to be, both Bowie and Rodgers found themselves in pivotal points in their respective careers. Bowie had no record deal coming into the project, Rodgers had just released his solo record *Adventures in The Land of the Good*

Groove which had flopped commercially. Needless to say, there was a considerable amount of pressure involved.

3.2. We are Family

From the onset, the confidence of the Chic production team seems to leap out of the speakers. There is no lengthy intro or attempt to build anticipation of any kind as the track is announced by a short snare drum sequence. Following this short "heads up" from the drums, the tutti ensemble kicks in on the first downbeat. The opening seems to convey a sense of optimism along with an anthemic quality. As the vocals are revealed, the anthemic quality is further enhanced with the repeated "We Are Family" uttered by Sister Sledge in a riff-like fashion. Often associated with repeated patterns played by horn sections or guitars[35], the definition given by Allan Moore describes a riff as "a simple (normally repeated) musical idea." (Moore 2001:225) Though the content of a riff is often simple both in tonality and rhythm, they have proven a highly effective vehicle in the business of making hits. I will return to the vocal content shortly, after addressing the makeup of the musical framework in which the riff operates.

Being made alongside the Chic album *C'est Chic*, the spillover from "the Chic formula" is clearly present in the way the track sounds. Looking at the instrumentation, the lineup is all Chic. The elements present are few, there is the four-piece rhythm section consisting of bass, guitar, drums and keyboards. In addition, there are strings used as "orchestral sweetening", as Rodgers calls the effect. Focusing on the role of the instruments in a contextual view, the arrangement follows the makeup found in a great number of the more up-tempo songs recorded by Chic. This comprises a strong beat from the drum kit, placed up front in the sound spectrum both sonically and spatially. I will address this in further detail shortly. The bass line through the intro and hook solidly state the harmonic root of each bar, playing primarily the root and octave above. The sound throughout has a distinct attack to the note, and a strong midrange presence. When the track moves into the verse, the bass-

[35] And, of course, a host of other instruments like bass guitar, piano etc.

line becomes more embellished and melodic. Playing in his trademark "chucking" style, Rodgers stays in the upper register of the guitar throughout the intro and vocal hook.[36] Doing few embellishments on the chords, Rodgers plays mainly triads with an occasional suspended 4th. The piano can be described as divided in its function within the space of one bar. The first part of each bar (with the eight note anticipation included) it doubles the guitar and bass in stating the chord changes. On the third and fourth beat, it acts more as a counterpoint to the strings with descending melodic fills. Sonically, the piano resembles the previously mentioned description of both bass and guitar, with emphasis placed on the attack transient of the sound. This can be attributed both to the sound of the piano itself, as well as the playing style applied and the arrangement. Since there are strings filling in the harmonies, the need for a sustained keyboard sound is not called for (a more sustained style keyboard is heard in the breakdown section of the extended version of the track. In this section, the piano is substituted for a Fender Rhodes. This accomplishes both a softer attack and a more sustained sound). The final element in the instrumental track is the strings. As already mentioned, my analysis groups the strings with the piano. Where the piano is placed in the middle of the frequency spectrum, the strings reside in the higher frequency range. In tandem, the two act as a somewhat hybrid or compound timbre. Seen from a slightly different angle, they can be described as fulfilling a similar function of sustained chords through the intro and vocal hook. Since bowed strings have a soft attack as a part of their sonic signature, the piano helps articulate where the envelope starts. In the following section, I will turn to a more in-depth discussion of the different features.

3.2.1. Rhythmic layers

In my investigation of the overall rhythmic content of the track, I will look at the different layers of rhythm represented through the track. As the discussion above has already touched upon, the roles within the ensemble are divided quite clearly. With a solid emphasis on straight downbeats, the drums anchor the groove steadily to the 4/4 meter. The kick drum states beat one and three, while the snare drum is heard on the

[36] 10th-14th fret approx, which I consider as a guitarplayer to be high register in the context of chordal playing.

two and four. In addition to the snare, there are also handclaps added to augment the sound of the drums. I will elaborate on this shortly, when dealing with the sonic aspect of the track. The hi-hats are played on the level of the eight-note subdivision, with a clearly accented upbeat. In combination, the drums supply a rigid beat with only slight deviation in the form of ghost notes on the bass drum. In contrast to the rigidness of the drums, the rest of the ensemble heavily accent the upbeat of the fourth beat in each bar, extending into the first beat of the next bar. Put slightly different, there is a gesture of anticipation being played out. The tension between the drums and the other instruments is vital in propelling the groove forward. When compared to the track "Happy Man" from parallel Chic album *C'est Chic*, the function of the anticipated beat becomes clearer. The Chic track seems more static to my ears, lacking the forward motion of the Sister Sledge track. Looking back, or over, at funk music, the rhythmic concept of "We Are Family" bear some similarity to the concept of “The One”. Danielsen explores “The One” as a concept at great length in *Presence and Pleasure, The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament*. The following footnote in Danielsen’s text provides a point of departure in clarifying the terminology of “The One”;

> Here I distinguish between the one as a metrical unit - more precisely, the first beat of the measure - and the One as a sounding gesture (with a capital "O"). The latter is a characteristic rhythmic gesture in funk. It is centered around the first beat of the basic unit, but might extend far beyond the metrical limits of the first beat... (Danielsen 2006:229)

Danielsen uses the term “downbeat in anticipation” to describe the style of syncopation used in funk: “… a marked attack played as if it were a little early in relation to the basic pulse implied by the rhythm fabric.” (Danielsen 2006:73) As we will see through the following discussion, the spillover from the funk style rhythm is clearly evident in Rodgers music.

Looking at the rhythmic arrangement of "We Are Family", the relation to several traits transported from funk is evident. As Danielsen explains, the way several instrument plays *around* strong beats can be experienced as an extension. To elaborate on the specific rhythmic tension found in the intro and chorus of the track, I will now present an in depth look at the bass line. Besides the drums, the bass comes across as the strongest rhythmic element in the track. This is arguably rivaled by the vocals as they enter for the main hook. A key characteristic of the bass is the heavily accented off beats. As shown in the transcription below, the only strong downbeat is

played on the second beat of each bar. The third beat is anticipated by a sixteenth note played on an open string, leading into an octave gesture which is often associated with disco bass lines. One possible explanation to how Edwards constructs his bass line is found in Olly Wilson's study of the relationship between African and African-American music, specifically the tendency of cross rhythmic patterns. A cross rhythmic tendency is explained in Wilson as "…the interplay of two or more contrasting meters," (Wilson 1974:7) In "We Are Family", a cross rhythmic figure can be experienced starting from the upbeat on the four (fig.1). This onset stretches out over the equivalent of a dotted quarter note. The following gesture, including the characteristic octave jump can also be interpreted as a dotted quarter note. The result is a syncopated three-over-four tendency. In this bass figure, only the second beat (backbeat) falls on a downbeat. This adds tension and interest to the groove, without distorting the four to the bar feel. Put differently, this is a good example of the mentioned concept of the downbeat in anticipation. An important thing to notice is that even though the bass line seems to compete with the basic pulse, it ends up providing a complimentary effect.

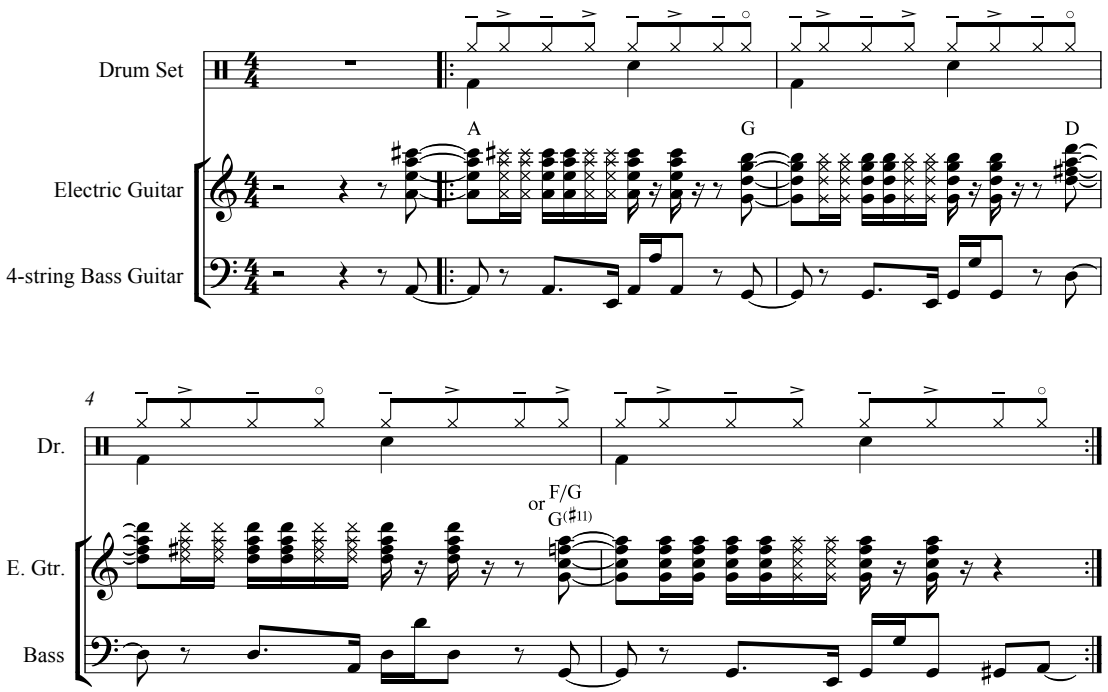

Fig. 1. This transcription outlines the parts played by the guitar, bass and drums. It is repeated through the intro and chorus of the song. Since the track was recorded "live", there are ad lib variances.

Picking up on Olly Wilson's concept of what is dubbed “simple syncopation” versus polyrhythm, Danielsen addresses this along with adding the importance of articulation:

> If a regular pattern of syncopation appears in the music for a long time, sooner or later it ceases to be heard as deviation from the main pulse: it ends up forming an independent and equally relevant layer of pulses. However, this change also depends upon how self-reliant the competing rhythmic gesture is and how clearly the figure is articulated. (Danielsen 2006:62)

Using this concept in analyzing the bass line of "We Are Family", the importance of articulation along with the sonic treatment of elements become highly evident. Even though the bass might have a tendency towards a competing rhythm, it is somehow aligned with the drums on the beat of the kick drum. Also, the strong emphasis on the two and four of each bar serves to avoid any rhythmic ambiguity that might occur. What we're left with is a clearly articulated rhythm track courtesy of the drum kit, with tension and excitement added by the rest of the band. In his Ph.D. dissertation[37], Hans T. Zeiner-Henriksen comments on how a similar counter rhythmic tendency can be observed in EDM.[38] “… these events do not emphasize certain beats but instead compete with them to some degree, thereby contributing tension to the experience of them.” (Zeiner-Henriksen 2010:184)

The vocals also contribute significantly in the overall rhythmic mix. The main hook of the song, the "We are family, I've got all my sisters with me" part is more of a rhythmic statement as opposed to a melodic line. Hitting the downbeats in a clearly articulated fashion, the presentation of the hook serves to reinforce the main rhythmic layer to the point where there is virtually no room for ambiguity. What is left is the syncopated gesture at the end of each vocal phrase, preserving the strength of the anticipation of the first beat of the next bar. Again, the concept of the downbeat in anticipation describes how this phrasing relates to the basic pulse. The word “me” at the end of the vocal hook is a good example of a downbeat in anticipation.

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[37] *The ”PoumTchak” Pattern: Correspondences Between Rhythm, Sound, and Movement in Electronic Dance Music*, Hans T. Zeiner-Henriksen (2010)

[38] EDM= Electronic Dance Music

3.2.2. Notes on harmony

The changes of the intro and hook is written in the form of a four bar cycle, with changes happening at the rate of one bar. The harmonies deviate from what would be expected from a pop track. As I have already stressed through chapter two, Rodgers often employ an extended harmonic vocabulary within pop songs. Starting on an A major chord, the tonal centre seems to be established. Moving to a G major chord, a mixolydian "flavor" is established. The following D major also fits within the A mixolydian framework, as it would be the Ionian major in relation to A mixolydian. On the turnaround is where the track strays from the diatonic sense of organization. Spelling this chord from the bottom up, it could be called G#11. An alternative description would be G/F, basically an F triad with a G bass note. Looking at how this acts as a *function* within a tonal framework, its purpose is to add tension resolving into the following A major chord following it. The tension is supplied by a number of dissonant notes in relation to the A major chord, the notes F and C are both chromatic neighbors to the F# and C# of A. In approaching the harmony from this angle, one might suspect that the high degree of tension could sound foreign in a popular music context. The way the chord is voiced, meaning the order in which the notes are organized, does not stress its dissonant quality. It does, as mentioned above, sound like an F triad with the ninth/second degree in the bass. This style of writing is often used by Rodgers, which is adapting a more jazz flavored harmonic vocabulary to fit within the context a pop song. It is not only the use of the eleventh chord in itself that is of importance, it is also in the way the tension is resolved. As heard in "Isn't She Lovely"[39] by Stevie Wonder, the eleventh acts as a secondary dominant in order to provide a smooth modulation between different keys. In this particular Stevie Wonder track, the song starts on the sixth degree of the E major tonic. It then moves to an F#7, suggesting a II-V-I progression leading to B major. Instead of resolving to B major, Wonder employs a B11. This creates a dominant chord landing on the E major for resolution.

[39] Appears on: Wonder, Stevie (1976). *Songs in the Key of Life,* R 22218, Motown.

Drawing from my experience as a guitar player, there is one further quality about the particular voicing of the eleventh chord used in the track. Spelling the notes from the bass up, yields the notes G, C, F, A and D. Playing this voicing on a guitar in standard (EADGBE) tuning is done by simply laying a finger, usually the index finger, across the fret board of the guitar holding down strings A to E. The point I am trying to make here is how the idiosyncrasies of Rodgers' style of playing can be recognized in the choice of harmonic material. I will return to issues regarding the influence if instrumental idiosyncrasies in the context of the compositional process through the chapter on "Let's Dance".

3.2.3. Vocal arrangement

Following what I would describe as a presentation of the groove, the vocals enter with the delivery of the main hook of the track. The production and arrangement of the vocals provide the most distinct departure from what is found in Chic, as described in the previous chapter. “We Are Family” has what I would call a more dramatic and expressive character compared to that of Chic. It can be described as more straightforward, in a way, with less overdubs and doubling. The result is a combined choral sound that is more reminiscent of what one would expect from a live setting. This seems to emphasize the values that are explicitly voiced in the lyrics. Also, the lead voice through the verse and out chorus has a delivery rooted in the gospel tradition. It has an improvised, melismatic approach not found in Chic. The producer team of Edwards and Rodgers tailored their approach in order to bring out the characteristics of specific vocalists. Their concept is described in Easlea, bringing the vocalists in when the track was nearly finished. Also, the vocal parts were not revealed in advance. This meant the vocalists were coming in unprepared, and had to interpret the words and melody in front of the microphone. As quoted in Easlea,

> “A lot of those lines we had to make up, because the melodies weren’t clear – and a lot of those lines were written as we were singing”, says Joni Sledge. “Nile and Bernard would be there with the lyrics – and we were given them fresh off the press.” (Easlea 2004:136)

Kathy Sledge later describes this as a frustration, as they were used to being able to rehearse (ibid.:137). The more general point I am trying to make through presenting

this discussion is that every aspect of what goes on in a session has an influence on the final result. So the reach of the producer's role also involves an element of psychology. The problem this suggests in the context of analysis is that such knowledge is dependent upon statements from the people involved in the actual process.

3.2.4. Sonic arrangement

From a sonic perspective, the production of the track seems to lean towards a "live" performance style of aesthetic. Using the distinctions proposed by Timothy Warner, this would place the track outside the realm of pop music, leaning more towards a rock approach (Warner applies these characteristics to differentiate pop and rock approaches within a timeframe of 1967-1987). Among the characteristics Warner uses to describe rock is "Emphasis on performance" and "Emphasis on musicianship". This is contrasted by the tendency of pop, "Emphasis on recording" and "Emphasis on technology" (Warner 2003:4). Listening to the production of "We Are Family", I would argue that the emphasis clearly highlights both performance and musicianship. Both in the way the instruments are played and how they are treated in the latter stages of the production, the clarity of "who is playing what" is an essential component in the final product. Using a virtual stage as a metaphoric stage as a template, the instruments are distributed in a way that conveys a traditional stage plot. Drums and bass are placed center stage, with equal distribution in both stereo channels of the recording. The guitar is placed left of centre, and the piano on the right. The string section is distributed equally in both channels, evoking the idea of the players being placed on both sides of the stage. Aesthetically, the production of the track seems to strive for what could be described as a "natural" sound. As already mentioned, the notion of "natural" in a recorded setting is a highly fluid concept. In this context, I refer to how the presence of studio manipulation is downplayed. The opposite would be what Warner refers to as "emphasis on technology" and "emphasis on production" (ibid.). In comparison, the Chic track "Happy Man" mentioned earlier beats clear evidence of studio effects being used. The phasing effect added to the string section "de-naturalizes" the sound, producing what Brøvig-Andersen describes as an "opaque" mediation (Brøvig-Andersen 2007:47-50).

I would now like to focus on questions of why the production of "We Are Family" was done in this particular way. In his article "The Persona-Environment Relation in Recorded song" (2005), Allan F. Moore discusses the relationship enacted between the accompaniment and the singer within the context of a pop song. There are several points made by Moore throughout this article that I would like to relate to the production heard on "We Are Family". One of these points, the instrumentation and the style of playing, are already addressed to some extent earlier in this chapter, but in the light of Moore's article I will briefly revisit some elements.

> Accompaniments frequently sets the genre of a song, laying out the normative environmental conditions, together with all the expectation baggage that a theory of genre carries. Thus an adult oriented rock song, a country song, a punk song, an R'n'B song, are in large part defined by the instrumentation and sound-sources used to accompany the singer and, in some cases, the style of performance associated with those instruments individually or collectively. (Moore 2005)[40]

The way the track is presented, it seems to strive for sincerity. In other words, as already mentioned, the track has a sound that emphasize the uncomplicated family values following the image constructed around Sister Sledge as a group. This is achieved by downplaying the technological aspect of the production, placing the emphasis on performance through employing a more documentary style approach to recording.

Using the metaphor of body language suggested by Moore, the accompaniment strives to enforce what the “speaker” is suggesting. Stan Hawkins reflects on the role of the producer in the following manner "One could say that the production team's task is to position the mask." (Hawkins 2009:166) In the context of "We are Family", an overt use of technology could distort the image of the wholesome, down-to-earth appeal of the group. So what the listener ends up hearing is the result of a construction made by the songwriter and producing team, their interpretation of what Sister Sledge is. This can be related back to the concept of “Deep Hidden Meaning” explained in the previous chapter. The credibility of the track rests upon the listener buying into the idea of Sister Sledge as real, so the accompaniment is designed specifically to support this. As I will elaborate on through the chapter on both "Upside Down" and "Let's Dance" the crucial point in rests with

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[40] http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.05.11.4/mto.05.11.4.moore.html (read 18.04.2013)

the producer's interpretation of the artist they are producing. Chuck Klosterman stresses the importance of how the songs portraits the artist in a credible way in order to come across as sincere, and in his words, achieve greatness. "Madonna didn't write "Like a Virgin" or "Material Girl".[41] Some faceless dude did come up with those phrases, just as some faceless dude came up with "Hit me Baby, (one more time)" and "Oops I Did It Again". But the difference is that we thought Madonna somehow meant her words, even though they weren't hers. Nobody believes that with Spears." (Klosterman in Weisbard 2004:263)

3.2.5. Summary

The analysis of "We Are Family" shows how the production team adapts their formula to enhance the image and expression of the artists. As Klosterman argues, portraying a credible image of the artist through the production is essential. Even though Klosterman points specifically at lyrical statements, I would argue that both the music and the production are also responsible for contributing to the overall communication of the identity of the artist in question. My analysis indicates that besides adjusting the lyrics according to the values of Sister Sledge, the sound of the track is different from that of Chic. As I proceed to analyze "Upside Down" by Diana Ross, this point carries over.

[41] The faceless dude behind "Like a Virgin" incidentally is Nile Rodgers.

3.3 Upside Down

As with my analysis of "We Are Family", I will divide my analysis into sections addressing specific components of the track. Following the same basic layout as my previous analysis, my starting point is the instrumentation and the roles fulfilled by each member of the ensemble.

Drawing on the idea of layers proposed by Moore (Moore 2001:33-41), the guitar in this track poses an immediate problem to the framework set up by Moore. In describing what is dubbed “the first layer”, Moore characterizes this as "...an explicit rhythmic layer, where precise pitch is irrelevant." (Moore 2001:33) Elaborating on this, Moore places the drum kit and percussion in this layer. The problem of this statement is that it assumes the absence of a rhythmic function being carried out by other instruments. Taking into account the guitar arrangement heard on "Upside Down" (and any other track employing funk style guitar), it becomes clear that an instrument can operate in a fluid way within several layers in one track. Exemplified explicitly in the opening of "Upside Down", the guitar is used in a drum like fashion with no audible pitch. Per the description given by Moore, the guitar is heard as a percussion instrument. As the rest of the ensemble enter, the guitar joins in the harmonic progression of the track while remaining distinctly percussive through dampening the strings. This prevents the chords from ringing out, placing an emphasis on the rhythmic function of the attack as opposed to harmonic content. One possible explanation to the division made by Moore is the rock centric approach, which seems to be at the core of his discussion. In addition to the main guitar, there is also an overdubbed guitar playing muted stabs exclusively. The effect of this is similar to handclaps, an often-used augmentation of the pop and rock rhythm section. An even further elaboration on the guitar as a rhythm section instrument is exemplified by what the guitar plays through the verse, or rather what it does not play through the verse. The guitar is omitted through this part, which achieves the effect of a clear separation between the two main parts of the track.

As we have seen, the definition of the first layer ends up being problematic as its defining features are somewhat open ended. The second layer is summed up as comprised of one single instrument, the bass guitar (ibid.). This layer comes across as less ambivalent compared to the first. Throughout "Upside Down" the bass fills a

traditional role in the context of dance-oriented music. I will return to elaborate on the specifics of this role shortly.

The third layer consists of the melodic elements of the track. "This layer corresponds to the common-sense understanding of tune." (ibid.) Relating this to "Upside Down", the vocal naturally places itself in this layer. The role of the vocal in this particular case, as the hook of the track is somewhat complex. I will address this issue as a part of the discussion on rhythmic content and production.

The fourth layer acts as a collective sum of all the elements left out of the previous three layers. Moore coins the term “harmonic filler” to describe the remaining elements. In the context of "Upside Down", the arrangement lends itself well to this description. Being more specific, the term addresses the use of strings as a means to augment the harmonic content of the track. As the core band of drums, bass and guitar emphasize rhythmic qualities; the need for reinforcement of the harmonic content is clearly evident.

3.3.1. Repetition and form

Besides looking at the instrumentation of the track, an investigation into how the song is compiled on a formal level serves to form a basis for further analysis.

A key element in most pop songs is the use of repetition. Moore describes repetition in the context of rock through the discussion of instrumental roles, emphasizing the function of the drum kit. "It has always been the function of the kit to provide a basic pattern of stresses that underpins, and sometimes counterpoints, that of the pitched instruments. It is of the essence that this pattern is repeated." (Moore 2001:37) In the introduction of the chapter "Between Song and Groove", Anne Danielsen description of repetition and form serves as a template of how "Upside Down" is presented. Compared to Moore, Danielsen provides a more elaborate description:

> Normally, a standard pop/rock tune consists of a repetitive layer where the groove runs non stop as a hierarchy of sequences that order the basic units into larger groups of four, eight, sixteen, and so on. The drums and bass usually form a basic two-bar pattern, while the guitar often plays a riff across four bars, or two basic units. The vocal may in turn ordered cross eight bars; when repeated, this comprises a verse of sixteen bars. (Danielsen 2006:172)

Richard Middleton uses the term “musematic repetition”. This term is described as following "Musematic repetition is, of course the repetition of musemes; the most immediately familiar examples - riffs - are found in Afro-American musics and in rock." (Middleton 1990:269) He further elaborates "Repetition in Afro-American musics is most often musematic (riffs; call-and-response structures; short, unchanging rhythmic patterns" (ibid.:270).

Looking at "Upside Down", the main repeated figure consists of a two bar pattern. This pattern forms a unit Danielsen refers to as a “basic unit” (Danielsen 2006:43). This two-bar pattern is then repeated with a rhythmic variation in the following two bars, forming a four bar unit. The transcription below shows the guitar and bass patterns:

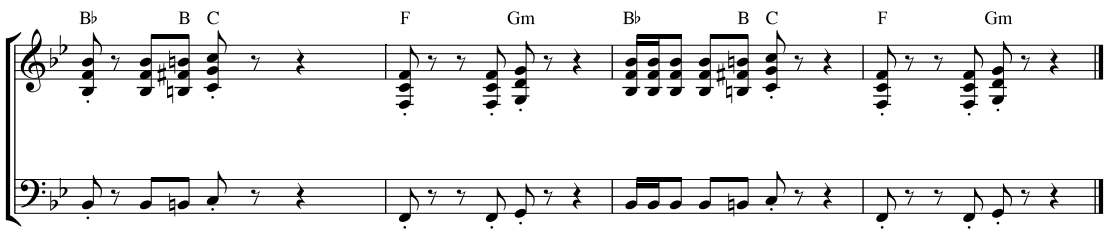

Fig.1. The four bar pattern appearing in “Upside Down”

This four bar unit forms the basis of the chorus of the track. The manner in which Rodgers goes straight to the chorus of the track is a frequent trait in his style of songwriting. This can be observed in all the tracks analyzed within this chapter. One possible inspiration for this style of writing is Rodgers background in jazz. Most jazz standards show a similar structure, as exemplified by "Lullaby of Birdland" by Shearing/Weiss, "How High The Moon" by Lewis/Hamilton and "My Funny Valentine" by Rodgers/Hart. In the case of these standards, the melodic hook is presented at the very beginning of the song. This is commonly referred to as the “head” or the “straight” in jazz terminology.

So far, the discussion on form places "Upside Down" firmly in the popular music tradition regarding issues of form. The question of how a song, or track, that seems to conform to thousands of songs before is able to stand out. As already mentioned, repetition is a central concept. This leads into the issues on the term “hook”. The “hook” can be described as an instantly recognizable part of the track,

making it original *enough* to stand out. In the following section, I will discuss the construction of what I perceive as the hook in “Upside Down”.

3.3.2. Rhythm

Through the discussion on instrumentation and form, I have repeatedly mentioned the importance of the rhythmic elements of the track. My main focus through this section of the analysis will be the interaction between the elements, and how these collectively communicate the “groove” in relation to the metronomic pulse of the track. As previously mentioned, the track is based upon the repetition of a two bar rhythmic pattern with slight variation throughout the course of the track. I will refer to this unit as the rhythmic hook of the track. This rhythmic hook is presented right away, in the opening bars of the track. The notation below shows this basic unit, represented by the bass line.

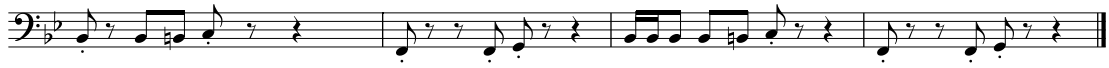

Fig.2. Notation represents the bass line

Presented by a unison rhythm section, the hook comes across with great force. In the first bar, the snare drum provides further augmentation in establishing the hook. In instances like this, the relationship between the foreground rhythm of the hook and the structure of reference becomes an important reference point. Following the heading "The Internal Beat", Danielsen explains the interaction of the rhythmic elements:

> Rhythm comprises an interaction between the rhythmic structure and the sounding realization(s) of such structures. This interaction goes both ways, and in fact it is the sounding events that usually serves as the basis for the non-sounding schemes activated by the listener (though those schemes immediately inform the listeners experience of the sounding events). (Danielsen 2010:19)

Through this approach, the challenge in the case of “Upside Down” becomes the identification of elements anchoring the groove to the metronomic pulse. In "Upside Down" this is indicated through several layers of the groove. My approach in this identification process will start from the highest level of resolution/subdivision. As the hi-hat plays a pattern of steady sixteenth notes, this is where the highest level

of resolution is found. The hi-hat, as a result, establishes the framework of the 4/4 time signature. Although the sixteenth notes are played continuously, there are certain points of the beat that is accented. I will return to this in more detail shortly.

As the transcription presented earlier shows, the hook is built around an eight-note subdivision. The weighted beats are the first and third beats of each bar. The weight of these beats are provided both by anticipation through the tension and release of the harmony and the dynamics of the drum kit. Again, the concept of the downbeat in anticipation can be applied.

On top of the already mentioned elements, the strings are also accentuated through, among other things, anticipation. As the discussion on "We Are Family" shows, the way the rhythmic hook is employed has elements of the concept of 'The One' found in funk music. Again, the anticipation is achieved through the connecting of the fourth beat leading into the first beat of the next bar. The way this is accomplished is by employing a “ghosted” sixteenth note.[42]

The discussion so far has been concerned primarily with the chorus of the track. This emphasis stems from my interpretation of this as the main carrier of the 'hit factor' of the track. This is not meant as an indication of the verse being mere filler material, as it serves a significant purpose in providing a contrasting element to the chorus[43]. The rhythm heard on the verse is of a more static nature compared to the chorus. As mentioned, the guitar is silent during this passage. Instead of the rhythmic attack, sustained elements are given more room to bloom. The decrease in rhythmic density is also transferred to the harmonic element, introducing a static B minor tonality.

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[42] In a drum set context, a “ghost note” is a note that of considerably lower amplitude, compared to the accented hits.

[43] A possible interpretation is that the static nature of the chorus provides a lasting element of tension, released by the return to the verse.

3.3.3. Harmonic content

The main goal of this segment is to highlight key elements of the harmonic devices used through the track. As with the rhythm, the harmonic content is based on repetition of a short sequence that stays consistently through the track. This further elaborates on the notion of a “musematic repetition”, as a result of the absence of development through the course of the track.

First I would like to focus on how the harmony deviates from the diatonic concept of tension and release through the traditional function of the dominant V-I progression. Instead, Rodgers uses a chromatic line to propel the track forward. This is introduced in the first bar, moving from Bb major to C major by use of a B major connection. This points to a general observation on the songwriting of Rodgers: a key tool in the employment of harmonic dissonance is how deviations from the main key are phrased. Viewing the B major chord as a chromatic passing chord, its use is similar to what can be found within the jazz style of arranging, where chromatic passing movements are placed on the upbeats. The tension of the chord gets released immediately into the following downbeat.

Moving into the chorus of the track, the intensity of the track changes. This section involves a key change, from Bb major to Bb minor through a chromatic movement starting on G minor. Metaphorically, this could be described as a change of backdrop.

3.3.4. Production

When now proceeding to investigate the production of the track, my goal is to connect the elements brought forward in the previous discussion. In other words, how does the final product *sound*? As my reference I will use the version of the track originally issued by Motown in 1980. I will then compare this to the version made by Edwards/Rodgers.

My analysis will be based on the concept of the “sound box” (SB), as described by Allan Moore "... a “virtual textural space”, envisaged as an empty cube of finite dimensions with respect to real time (almost like an abstract, three-

dimensional television screen)." (Moore 2001:121) Moore has later elaborated on the model:

> Analysis of spatial elements of popular music recordings can be made by way of the 'sound box', a concept that acknowledges the way sound sources are perceived to exist in four dimensions: laterality, register, prominence, and temporal continuity. (Moore and Dockwray 2008:219)

As of my interpretation, the goal of the SB is to offer an extended interpretation of what is commonly referred to as "the mix". I will address the problems and limitations of this concept in the analysis of "Let's Dance", but in the instance of "Upside Down" I will employ the concept as a descriptive tool.

From a producer's point of view, a wide range of techniques is available when it comes to distributing various elements of a production in the sonic space. I will give a brief description of some of these in the following section, including panorama, reverb, equalizers (EQ), compression and reverb/echo. Panorama, or "panning", effects the placement of sound sources along the width axis of the room. EQ enables emphasis to be put on certain frequencies, which can serve several purposes. As sound travels, the higher frequencies have a quicker rate of dissipation compared to lower frequencies. Resulting from this is a perceived notion of distance to the source through the presence of high frequency content. Compression serves a similar purpose, by limiting the dynamics of the source sound. Describing this crudely, compression is often used to evoke a notion of intimacy through the amplification of weak input signals. To give an example, a compressor, placing the performer right next to the listener's ear, would typically amplify the sound of the vocalist breathing. The last tool mentioned is reverb and echo, which reveal a more complex nature. A short description is a challenge at best, for the purpose of this thesis I will refer to reverb as the outer bounds of the SB itself. In other words, the reverb concerns the space in which the sound sources are situated. These spaces could be a replica of a certain scene of performance, often described in the form of preset configurations as "large hall", "empty club", "cathedral", "tiled bathroom" and so forth. They could also be utterly surreal, and even differentiated drastically within the same production. I will return to a more elaborate investigation regarding the use of space when discussing "Let's Dance", in the following segment this shortlist of production tools is meant solely as a short introduction to how these relate to the concept of the SB.

Looking back at the discussion on instrumentation and arrangement, these parameters are linked to the height axis of the box. The bass and kick-drum are placed towards the floor of the box, emphasizing low frequencies. Guitar, vocals, piano and snare drum are placed in the middle, while cymbals and strings are at the top towards the ceiling. This placement remains static through the track, as the instruments stay mainly within the same areas of pitch. The description so far only depicts the elements along the height axis, as would be the norm of a mono recording. By the use of “panning”, the elements are placed along the width axis of the box. In this specific case, as with "We Are Family', the distribution follows the tradition of a “live” stage plot. The fundamental rhythmic elements of bass and drum kit are solidly placed in the middle, the main guitar is “panned” to the left while the muted “rhythm only” guitar is placed towards the right side (viewed from the audience perspective). Both of these are 'hard panned', a term used to describe the utmost level of panorama to either side. This technique is used to achieve clarity between elements playing unison patterns, as is the case through this track.

The placing of the vocals in the centre further enhances the idea of a “live” stage plot. Apart from this physically rooted metaphoric placement, a key aspect in the description of the SB is the idea of foreground versus background. This idea proves to be more fluid and open to interpretation than the mere placement of sound sources left to right. The latter can be investigated in detail by simply listening to the presence of elements moving the stereo balance from left to right, while foreground/background placement involves a complex set of different parameters. I have already mentioned the use of EQ and compression. Another obvious factor is the amplitude of a sound source. Higher level of amplitude brings a source sound closer to the listener (Owsinski 2006:11). Relating this to "Upside Down", I find the chief source of the foreground/background perspective to be through amplitude. I draw this assessment based on the lack of differentiated spaces through reverberation. The reverb places the performers close to the listener in a “large hall” type environment. The closeness to the performers is provided by the way the reverb sits low in the mix, as what I would call a “sonic backdrop”. A likely intention of the way the reverb is mixed is to create a large space without blurring the clarity of the sound sources. Put differently, this creates a massive sound based on a small number of elements. To exemplify further, this can be seen as the opposite of the Phil Spector approach,

where the “massiveness” of the sound is created through the use of a large ensemble with a severe amount of “leakage”[44] between the mics (Toynbee 2000:87-89). The approach of using a small ensemble is an identifying trait across through a number of productions by Rodgers.

Elaborating further on the use of space through reverberation, this seems to be one of the distinguishing features separating the remix of the track compared to the original mix by Edwards/Rodgers. As mentioned briefly in the introduction to this analysis, the mix of the track was changed before the track was initially released. The “Original Chic Mix” (as represented on streaming website “Wimp”) has a more dry mix, with less presence of reverb. The effect of this is a higher degree of separation between elements, placing the vocals in a different environment than the accompaniment. This highlights the fact that the vocal production was the main source of conflict through the recording and mixing of the track.

> ‘The basic problem was that we had two different concepts of what her voice should sound like’, Rodgers countered back then. 'She hears her voice in one way and we hear in another way. When it got to the point where she wanted her voice to sound a certain way, we couldn't take responsibility for it because that's just not how we make records’. (Easlea 2004:180)

This quote shows, along with the analysis above, the necessity of dealing with the *sound* of popular music, beyond the mere form, rhythm and harmony. The outcome of a production remains open ended, as the result is nearly infinitely changeable beyond the actual recording of sound. Investigating the impact of the changes made in the final mix would result in mere speculation, but at the time of release, changing the mix was essential in having the song released (ibid.:181).

[44] ”Leakage” is a term used to describe how several microphones pick up the sound sources in recording space. The sound of an electric guitar, in example, would be heard in the microphones of the drum set, the bass and so forth. Due to the slight variances in distance from the sound source, this will alter the overall sound of the electric guitar.

3.3.5. Summary

As with “We are Family”, the analysis of “Upside Down” show how the writing and production team adapt their approach to suit the artist. However, the basic ingredients remain the same. For instance, the track is built around the rhythm section in much the same way as both the tracks of Chic and “We are Family”. Also, the hook is rooted in a rhythmic idea as its dominant feature. In both instances there is a focus on the performance of the band and the vocalist, with the production in terms of effects and mix are adapted to suit the artist. As this thesis revolves around the investigation of signature features in Rodgers music and production work, “Upside Down” provides a further indication that the style of musicianship and plays a key role. This is not to suggest that a project using the Chic session band would necessarily sound like a Rodgers production, as the songwriting and producing process are all closely interconnected. The following chapter on “Let’s Dance” will deal with, among other things, how the “Rodgers signature sound” is present in a production involving a different songwriter and an alternative band lineup.

3.4. Let's Dance

First, I will address the way this song was arranged by Rodgers. In a master class held in Montreux,[45] Rodgers explains how he approached the raw material supplied to him by Bowie. This consisted of strummed chords, through a chord change consisting of an A minor chord moving to F major. Rodgers explains how he first changed the key up a semi-tone to make the guitar part an overall brighter sound, pointing at the idiosyncrasies of the guitar as the reason for this. The standard tuning used on guitar (EADGBE) provides the A minor key with a particular timbre, due to the great amount of sympathetic vibrations occurring. These natural harmonics tend to be more pronounced on open strings (non-fretted notes), the 5th, the 7th and 12th fret (then re-occurring in the upper octave past the 12th fret). In the context of Let's dance, this timbre was not to the liking of Rodgers, consequentially the key was changed to the mentioned Bb dorian minor (b3, #6).

3.4.1. Considerations on the Guitar

In this instance the guitar becomes a vital piece of technology in the process of sculpting the sound of the recording. This to me serves as an example on how the technology used contributes to the creative process in what could be described as an integrated way, where the interface between user and technology influence the musical outcome. Moore approaches a somewhat related issue when discussing "composing at the instrument" (Moore 2001:59-60). A key theory following this heading lies in how idiosyncrasies of instruments has a fundamental impact on the music made. When describing the guitar, the layout of the fret board is of essence. This layout, as Moore describes, differentiate the effort required to play chords. As a result, songs composed on the guitar have a tendency of being written within limited harmonic boundaries, according to Moore (ibid.:60). As mentioned above, this also includes arrangements made at the guitar. Following the lead of the discussion raised by Moore, there are further issues I see the need to address. An assumption of a "default" mode involved across a collective crowd of guitar-based composers, I

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[45] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-S_7X3NEmw
(viewed 11.04.2013)

would argue, is largely false. This might have been the case for one particular generation of guitarists, although I seriously doubt this. Drawing from my own experience as a teacher of guitar, the range of what inspires a person to pick up this particular instrument varies greatly. Consequently, the repertoire reflects this broad range of inspiration. The challenges posed on the aspiring guitarist vary as to what they are trying to harness from the instrument. Needless to say, the young player trying to mimic a dubstep artist like Skrillex will struggle with a different set of challenges compared to the Metallica devotee. Taking this background with them into the process of songwriting, their musical preferences and background will most certainly have as much of an effect on the outcome as the instrument on which it is composed.

Even though the guitar is tuned "standard" in most instances, the tuning keys located at the "head" of the guitar gives the player instant access to rearrange the intervallic distribution of the strings.[46] Commonly referred to as "alternate tunings", these tunings opens the guitar up to possibilities often physically impossible in "standard". As a result, the terms on which the guitar specific discussion is raised would be changed. Taking the discussion on technology (including musical instruments) one step further, a tendency of presenting the challenges and limitations as static and predictable needs to be addressed. In a worst case scenario these assumptions, as I would cal them, can lead to false conclusions based on perceived causal connections. From my own experience, I am certainly "guilty as charged" of traveling that road. My initial assumption when starting the analysis of "Let's Dance" was that the use of echo was what fueled the idea for the main riff of the song. As first hand information later revealed[47], the riff was conceived before the echo was put on. If anything, this goes to show that interpreting the creative stage of a song from a listener's perspective is at best problematic. Apart from "alternate tunings" (see footnote 41), another common practice is detuning of the guitar. When detuning, all strings are lowered equally in pitch. This allows for changing the pitch while

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[46] In "Let's Dance", the guitar is tuned standard (as referred to in my text). The mentioning of tunings is meant as an example to problematize the arguments used by Moore.

[47] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-S_7X3NEmw
(viewed 11.04.2013)

maintaining the same harmonic layout across the fret board a “standard” tuning. Guitarists for a number of different reasons do this. Detuning reduces string tension, which makes “bending” strings easier. It could also be the result of adapting to a certain vocal range, much the same as using a capo to uniformly raise the pitch.

Returning to the arrangement of "Let's Dance", detuning would have accomplished the removal of the Am chord from the harmonically resonant 5th and 7th fret. Why Rodgers did not do it this way is a question I will not attempt to answer. It does however lead into a further elaboration of Moore’s' discussion. As his book has “Rock” clearly stated in its title, it is in the context of rock the uses of the instruments are interpreted. Coming from what he describes as a “jazz” and “session” background, the choices made by Rodgers as an instrumentalist tend to differ from the “rock” world of Moore. Open position chords, as charted out by Moore (Moore 2001:60) tends to be as un-common in jazz and funk as they are common in blues and rock. I will not attempt to present an all-encompassing thesis as of why this is the case, but there are reasons from a player point of view that I see as essential to my discussion. Looking at the role of the instruments in an ensemble, there are differences worth noting between the musical style idioms that I have drawn into my discussion. In the tradition of jazz and funk, perhaps especially the latter, the guitar is a rhythm section instrument. Back in the early days of big bands, the unamplified guitar (and/or banjo) would simply not be heard playing single string melodic lines. The rhythm style of Freddie Green of the Count Basie orchestra comes to mind as an example of the guitar played as “pitched percussion”. In short, his style was based around playing strict quarter note pulse with sparse chord voicings often containing two or three notes. [48]Leaping forward in time, into the guitar style of funk, the guitar has a predominately rhythmic function. Since the guitar is amplified at this point, it is more up front sound wise, but the function in the ensemble still remains primarily rhythmical. There are several possible discussions to be raised concerning the purpose and result of this style of playing. Relating to the discussion above, the absence of open chords enables the player to control the duration of the notes with greater precision. Lifting the fretting hand slightly, stopping string vibration, mutes the notes.

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[48] Green’s style is charted out in detail at www.freddiegreen.org, read 11.04.2013, where one article even proposes that he played the self-contradicting “one note chord”.

This left hand muting (right if the player is left handed) is an essential part of Rodgers' style on the instrument, and is heavily featured in the riff that serves as the hook of "Let's Dance". It creates a more sharply articulated attack, emphasizing the rhythm while downplaying the harmonic content by not letting the chords ring out. This again allowed for a more adventurous sequence of chords, a technique that can be heard frequently in songs by Chic.

3.4.2. Arrangement

Besides the half-step-up move, the embellishments are added to the original progression. Following the discussion above, this is a further step in changing the style of this particular track.

The first chord has an 11th degree note added to the chord, thus making it a Bbm11. Still on the Bbm, the 13th degree gets added. When moving to the Gb major chord (formerly an F), the 6th degree is stacked on top of the basic triad forming a Gb6 tonality. The chord cycle ends on a Bbm7 to conclude the 'chordal phrase'. The result is an overall increased density in the harmonic progression, as the extensions elaborate on the basic triads of Bbm and Gb major.

In Figure 1 and 2, we see the chords and rhythmic pattern approximately as written by Bowie, in a sketch presented to Nile Rodgers[49], and the rearranged version as presented on the released track (including actual voicing of chords), respectively.

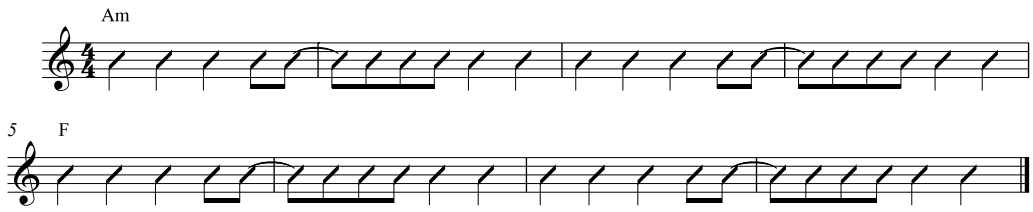

Fig. 1 Chords and rhythmic pattern of David Bowie's initial sketch of Let's Dance

[49] Transcription based on Rodgers' presentation during the aforementioned masterclass in Montreux, 2012

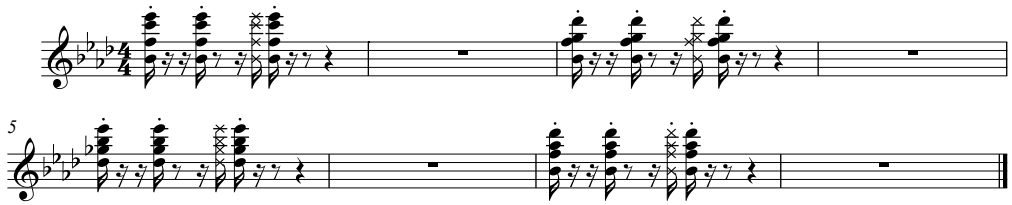

Fig.2. Rearranged version, as presented on the released track (Bar 1: Bbm11, bar 3: Bbm6, bar 5: Gb6 [omit root], bar 7:Bbm7. Voicings written as they appear in the track)

Taking a step back from the close-up look on what is going on musically, there are interesting points to be drawn from examining the change in arrangement. Changing the arrangement in such a drastic fashion both in terms of rhythm and harmony changes the style of the song at a fundamental level. In this context, I use style as a term to reflect upon the change in the stylistic references contained within the music. As mentioned in the analysis of "We Are Family", the instrumental accompaniment is important in the construction of the overall message carried by the track. Discarding the strummed guitar means leaving the reference to folk style music behind.[50]

Rodgers draws on his background as session player rooted in jazz, which offers some insight in his affliction to extend the harmonic content. The change in style brings the music to him; so to speak, it makes the music more available to him as it is now something he can relate to personally. This again can be seen from different angles in this context, namely the role of the producer. Rather obviously, transporting the music into a familiar musical “territory” makes for less friction in the creative process. Since the explicit goal of the project from start was making hits, it seems clear that Rodgers was more comfortable with 'doing his thing' as opposed to exploring new territory.

In combination, the rhythmic and harmonic arrangement made by Rodgers and influenced by his background as a guitarist to me seem to dictate the placement of the other instruments are placed in the sound spectrum. An argument supporting this view

[50] The term ”folk music” in this context refers to the singer songwriter style, made popular in the sixties by artists like Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Joan Baez etc.

is the placement of the main guitar riff along the temporal axis of the song. More simply put, the guitar riff is the first thing the listener is exposed to - after the rather obvious reference to The Isley Brothers "Twist & Shout".[51]

In an investigation of the sonic effect of the arrangement, the “sound-box” and the idea of density seem relevant to me. Besides the placement of sound in a “virtual room”, other key concepts include texture and density (Moore 2001:121-124). The guitar riff, as described, leaves a gap of one entire bar between each phrase. In effect, this leaves space for other instruments to protrude.

Pursuing the idea of the guitar riff as the formative idea in the arrangement, the bass can be seen as following this lead. What I mean by this is that the bass line is given more space both range-wise and rhythmically due to the absence of the guitar in every second bar. In extension of this train of thought, there are also the concept of foreground and background to be reckoned with. The way the instruments are arranged leaves room for more elements in the foreground of the spectrum. In other words, the production can be described as dynamic in the sense that the foreground elements change continuously. This resembles a “call and response” type layout, where interplay happens along the temporal axis of the music. The vocal presentation in the verse offers further support to this interpretation, as Bowie can be heard answering the supporting vocals: "Let's Dance... Put on your red shoes and dance The Blues".

3.4.3. Production

Comparing the production of “Let’s Dance” with previous productions by Rodgers, the most striking difference in comparison to Chic, Sister Sledge or Diana Ross is a more pronounced use of effects. The track “Yum-Yum” from *Adventures in the Land of the Good Groove*, however, points in the direction of more adventurous approach also in the studio. Using a term borrowed from Lacasse, this could be explained as a

[51] Bowie even described the song as a “...postmodern homage” to “Twist and Shout” (Rodgers 2011:192)

more present use of "staging". Lacasse coins this term in an effort to home in on a certain area of recording practice.

> Consequently, alteration of a vocal sound with the help of an electrical sound processor - such as a reverb unit or a flanger - simply constitutes a *particular* form of vocal staging. On the other hand, altering vocal sound without the help of some external device – for example, speaking in a very high tone – is *not* considered here as a vocal staging. Of course, the concept of 'staging' can be expanded to any other sound source, or ensemble of sound sources. (Lacasse2000:4-5)

In dealing with the analysis of "Let's Dance", I find this concept highly useful as a way of dealing with songwriting/arrangement and studio production/technology side by side. To elaborate further on this, the discussion concerning the harmonic and rhythmic contributions made by Rodgers would not be a part of the "staging" concept. Applying this concept in the analysis of the ensemble sound of "Let's Dance" reveals a high degree of separation between elements. The guitar is distinctly treated with a panned echo. What this means is that the "dry", original sound of the guitar is placed to one side of the stereo image, while the "wet" effected signal is placed to the opposing side. Sonically, this creates an illusion of the guitar bouncing back and forth[52]. Once again, a useful descriptive term is coined by Lacasse to describe the effect the echo has in a musical context. He uses the terms "intramusical" and "extramusical" to describe the level of interplay between musical structure and the use of effects.

> …I will limit my observations to intramusical relations in terms of how vocal staging effects interact with other musical parameters. For example, an echo effect on the voice with, say, a delay time of 500 milliseconds, will definitely have an impact on the overall rhythmic structure of the recording: most generally, the delay time is rhythmically 'tuned' in direct proportion with the songs tempo. It will also give rise to additional intramusical relations, such as emphasizing the vocal excerpt (phrase or word) it affects (simply by repeating it). (Lacasse 2000:19)

Listening to the repeats of the echo specifically, an eight-note subdivision is dialed in the effects processor can be heard. The echo fills in subdivisions, which makes for a different rhythmic statement than the "dry" guitar by itself. Besides the rhythmic content being altered, the timbre resulting from the use of echo is also worthy of notice. The part could have been played "dry" while playing the

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[52] This effect is not to be confused with so-called ping-pong delay, where the delay repeats are split to both sides often with the dry sound somewhere in the middle.

subdivisions instead of having them provided by the echo. This, however, would yield a different timbre. As the echo feeds back the signal, it is degraded in varying degrees depending on the device used. Early devices such as the tape echo used by Les Paul and Sam Phillips would color the sound in different ways according to the state of the tape, as tape loses fidelity through use. Early microchip based analog delays, so-called "bucket brigade" circuits shows different, but somewhat related artifacts as tape echo, with the signal degrading throughout the repeats. In a musical context, this creates what I would call a "compound timbre". Put differently, the "dry" sound mixes with the echo, where the combination of the two can be perceived as being merged. Notorious user of echo (and every other effect for that matter), The Edge of U2 describes this in a more prosaic way in the movie "It Might Get Loud":

> 'I got his echo unit, and I brought it back to rehearsal. I just got totally into playing, but listening to the return echo. Filling in notes that I'm not playing, like two guitar players rather than one. The *exact* same thing, but just a little bit off to one side. I could see ways to use it that had never been used. Suddenly, everything changed.' (It Might Get Loud 58:25-59:10)

Zak points out a similar timbral effect in his description of echoes used on the Sun era Elvis Presley recordings. He emphasizes how the effect of echo shows a variation depending on its application. When discussing the difference between "Blue Moon of Kentucky" and "Blue Moon", Zak states: "At this track's[53] slower tempo the undulating echoes are felt not so much as rhythmic pulses but as ghostly shadows." (Zak 2001:72-73)

Besides the guitar, a horn section can also be heard during the presentation of the main riff through the intro. Unlike the guitar, there is no echo added to the sound of the horns, only a short reverberation is heard.[54] This places an emphasis on the rhythmic figure shown in fig. 2. When the song moves from the instrumental intro into the verse, the horns are omitted. As the guitar is left by itself, the dynamic of the riff changes leaving space for the vocals to enter the foreground. I find this approach similar to that found in arrangements written for big bands and other permutations of jazz ensembles of varying sizes. Variations in the instrumentation and/or doubling of

[53]Referring to "Blue Moon"

[54] Reminiscent of what is often labeled "Room" in a typical preset bank of a reverb unit/plugin.

parts are a common practice to achieve both timbral and dynamic variation throughout an arrangement. With reference to what I have dubbed a compound sound earlier in the context of echo, Dick Lowell and Ken Pullig use the term “shared sound” when explaining the effect of different instruments playing in unison (Lowell and Pullig 2003:33). Summing up the sound of the main rhythmic hook, its impact is harnessed from several sources. The rhythm stabs of the guitar supply a sharply defined rhythm, with the horns reinforcing the accented beats. Layered with this is the echo effect, which interacts both with the rhythmic and timbral qualities of the guitar. A further implication made by the echo is the notion of space and placement. I will deal with this matter shortly, including the remaining elements of the track. Leading into the discussion of space in “Let’s Dance”, I will now have a listen to the instrumentation of the track and discuss elements of the mix.

The rhythm guitar has a somewhat lead quality to it, cutting loudly through the mix. Adding the bouncing echoes, the guitar becomes an almost omnipresent element. The remaining rhythm section of drums and bass, played by Omar Hakim and Carmine Rojas, are tightly knit throughout the track. Only adding occasional anticipation of the beat, the bass follows the hits of the bass drum and snare in a precise fashion. Worth noticing is how the “hi-hat” is played mainly on each downbeat, adding to the quarter note emphasis in the rhythm section. The strictly contained rhythm combined with the precise unison accentuation of drums and bass creates a feel reminiscent of a sequenced track, revealing a spillover of influence from sequencer-based music onto more traditional musicianship. As aforementioned, Rodgers cites Giorgio Moroder as an influence on his own concept of rhythm guitar on “I want your Love” by Chic. In addition to the drum set, there is also a presence of percussion in the rhythm matrix. A sound reminiscent of a woodblock is used adding a sixteenth note rhythmic figure.

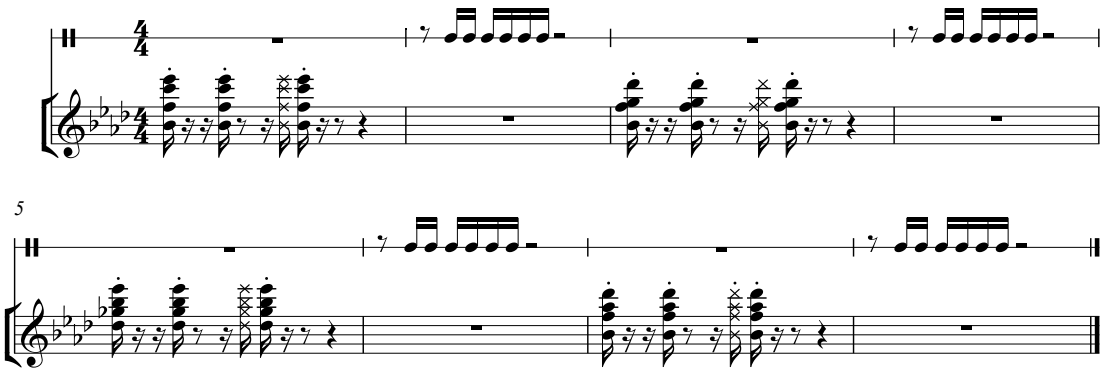

Fig. 3 First four 1/16TH notes in upper system are physically played – remaining notes echo

This is also treated with an echo, similar to the guitar. This includes panning the echoes, making the hits bounce off the "walls" of the sound box. Zak describes this percussion sound in particular, as signifying the presence of a digital echo. Due to the level of synchronicity between the echo and the groove of the track, a tape style echo is ruled out.

> Making it possible to set delay times to coincide with a track's metric subdivisions at the touch of a button, digital delay brought unprecedented flexibility to the source/echo relationship, and echo became a standard element in the mechanized groove. Listen, for example, to Nile Rodgers' production of David Bowie's "Let's Dance" (1983), with its groove-synchronized echoes of synthesizer stabs and temple blocks bouncing across the stereo spectrum…(Zak 2001:74)

This quote from Zak highlights how new technology contributed in inventing new sounds, through the introduction of previously unheard sonic spaces. I will discuss these spaces in the following section.

3.4.4. Use of space in "Let's Dance"

Up to this point, I have been focusing on the use of echo mainly as a rhythmic device. I would now like to go further into the spatial elements used in the production. As the track features an array of different spatial environments, there is a need to investigate both in the specifics of each element as well as the sonic whole of the track. Stemming from the compound technique used, singular elements can be interpreted differently "in conversation" with other elements than on their own. I will return to

these matters as I discuss the compound/multi spatial environment in the context of Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen's notion of the surreal (2013).

Besides the presence of collaged spaces seen in a vertical perspective, "Let's Dance" also contains an interesting use of space as a dynamic tool. By this I refer to the ways in which effects are applied to augment elements already present in the mix. In this specific discussion, listening closely to the drums is particularly revealing. Through the intro, the sound of the drums is only slightly reverberated. Resulting from this is a sound that emphasizes a tight rhythmic placement, due to a pronounced attack and a short decay of the sound. Going into the first verse, an echo is applied to the snare drum. In a similar way as described earlier in the context of the guitar, the use of panning in conjunction with the echo is used to create a dramatic effect. Listening to each side of the stereo spectrum separately reveals different rhythmic patterns being fed back by the echo. The right channel has an eighth note pattern with two repeats, whereas the left has a syncopated, more rapid sixteenth note feedback. As with the guitar, this creates an illusion of the source sound ricocheting between the left and right extremes. In the transcription below (fig.4), the rhythmic relationship between the two channels is shown. This rough outline shows how the repeats are offset between the channels, thus creating discernable hits coming from each channel. To create the effect heard, the timing of the echo is of crucial importance. If the repeats are not precisely timed, they would be more smeared into each other creating a different effect altogether. Also, as noted earlier in citing Zak, this reveals the impact of new technology, as the level of precision involved would be extremely hard to accomplish through analog manipulation.

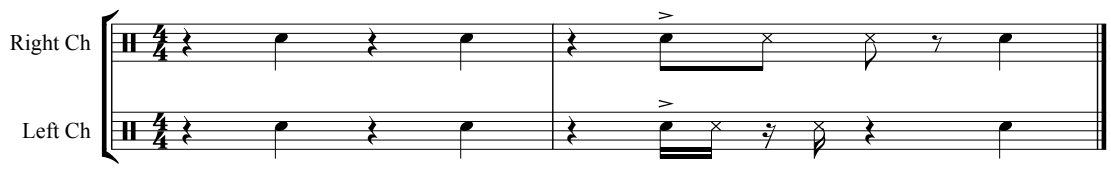

Fig. 4. This transcription shows the distribution of the snare sound in the stereo spectrum, bar one represents the last bar of the intro followed by the first bar of the verse (C note represents the snare drum of a pop/rock style drum kit, in standard treble clef)

Although a similar effect to that used on both the guitar and percussion through the intro, its solitary appearance makes it stand out more clearly as a new element to the sound of the drum set. Attempting to describe the effect of this "echo fragment" in the context of space reveals a challenge. Since it only appears briefly, and is not repeated within the following bars, it does not seem to establish a sense of a reconfigured space. The echoes appear to have a function leaning towards that of a drum fill, as an "announcer" of the new part. It does, however, have a both a spatial dimension and a timbral quality that is distinctly different from that of a traditional snare drum roll or the "herd of cattle running down (or up, for that matter) the tam-tams" type fill. In context of the track as a whole, the quick opening and closing of the echo window does seem to prepare the listener for what is coming next.

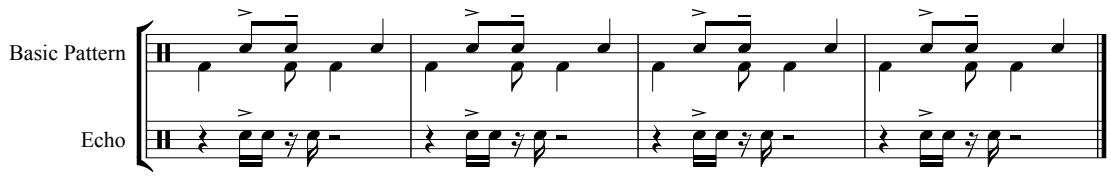

Fig. 5. Entering the chorus, the echo is brought back into the drum mix. In this transcription, the two parts are shown across two systems of drum kit notation. As with fig. 4, the note C represents the snare drum. The pitch F corresponds to the bass drum.[55]

I have included the strike falling on the second beat of the bar in both systems, as it is heard through both channels. This accents the initial beats, while the following repeats can be compared to what is referred to as "ghost notes" in traditional drummer terminology. As with the comparison to drum fills above, the function of the drum echoes seems to be derived from traditional playing techniques, but accomplished through technology. Handing the notation above over to a session drummer, I have little doubt that it could be played rather effortlessly. However, it would, hypothetically, sound quite different due to the mere physical gestures involved. More importantly, the location of the sound would be statically linked to its source. The possibility of panning a single sound source back and forth manually, as would be the

[55] Pitches/notes refers to treble clef

case in 1983, could not be done nearly precisely enough. Even with a digital workstation this would be a compromise, as the decay would follow the attack bouncing between the channels. In other words, the way the echo was applied results in a sound that is idiosyncratic to this specific piece of technology.

Imagining the environment in which the particular drum kit of "Let's Dance" is situated seems to evoke the notion of the surreal. What is revealed in the discussion above is a "spatial detachment" of the snare drum from the rest of the drum kit. I base this on the assumption that the listener perceives all the snare drum content originating from the same transmitting source.[56] This high degree of separation between the parts of the kit can be interpreted as being influenced by technological development. To trace the inspiration of Rodgers approach to the production of the drums in "Let's Dance", a possible explanation could be found in the arrival of drum machines. When programming a drum machine, like the Roland TR-808, it is a radically different interface than a traditional drum kit or percussion setup, as Paul Théberge puts it:

> The drum machine, on the other hand, bears no resemblance to traditional drums or drumming practice. The instrument has no direct, physical sound-producing mechanism; instead, it reproduces digital recordings of drum and/or synthesized sounds that are stored in its memory. (Théberge 1997:3)

As with any instrument, the drum machine offers its specific set of possibilities, as well as limitations. What I would like to focus on in the context of this discussion is the possibility separation of sounds offered by drum machines, such as the Roland TR-808.[57] Not being able to reproduce the sound of live drums, the sounds of the TR-808 sound distinctly like a drum *machine*. Its high level of "syntheticness" can be interpreted as a descriptive feature, and a sonic signifier in itself. Relating this to the discussion on naturalization in Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen, the rhythm sounds produced by the TR-808 can be said to have gone from

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[56] It could be argued that the different timbral quality of the echo repeats, combined with the separation placement, suggests a second drum part augmenting the main beat.

[57] As sampling and processing technology is ever advancing, its limitations and possibilities are highly fluid.

alien to being an iconic sound. I see this as related to the description of the naturalization process described in the introduction of this chapter.

As the drum machine was incorporated into pop music production, it brought with the ability of complete separation of drum strokes. In other words, any sound within a drum pattern could be treated as an individual instrument, so to speak. This includes panning, loudness, echo/reverb and so forth, like separate instruments on a multi track mixer. Not being able to faithfully reproduce the sound of a live drummer, it seems that users turned to the new possibilities offered by the drum machine. Within the context of Chic, the use of drum machines can be heard clearly on the title track of their album *Believer*. Replacing the grooves of Tony Thompson with programmed beats yields a noticeable difference in the overall sound of the ensemble. Listening to the intro, the hi-hat can be heard bouncing from side to side. This is the same effect as can be heard on "Let's Dance", applied to played drums. Worth noticing though, is that use of the drum machine instead of live drums yields a different context. Since the drum machine is a surreal instrument to begin with, it's not expected to behave in the same manner as a traditional drum kit in a recorded setting. My theory then, is that the use of panned and programmed echo on the drum kit can be interpreted as an aesthetic practice influenced by drum machines. In reference to an earlier example of computer technology influencing Rodgers' approach to band instruments, he mentions trying to emulate the sound of Giorgio Moroder on the guitar. This influence can be heard on "I Want Your Love", where Rodgers was trying to emulate a sequenced beat.[58]

Compensating for the increased density in the drum pattern resulting from the echoes, the spatial environment of the guitar is tweaked in the opposite direction. No longer ricocheting across the stereo spectrum, the guitar in the chorus sounds dry with no clearly perceivable ambiance surrounding it. Simply stating the chords as the changes move on, the role of the guitar is downplayed, leaving room for the drums. The role of the bass guitar also changes significantly, in comparison to the verse. Detached from its linkage to the drums, it joins the guitar in stating long sustained notes with only sparse embellishments appearing at certain phrase endings.

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[58] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gF1d227_4ac
(viewed 11.04.2013)

Rhythmically, it only plays the first beat of each bar with an occasional third beat on chord changes. As mentioned above, this changes the role of the bass guitar in the ensemble context. From being a driving part of the rhythm section along with the drums through the intro and verse, it is more of a harmonic support device through the chorus. Its function is merely to support the harmony by supplying the root note in the low end of the frequency spectrum. The notation below shows the parts of the guitar and bass, where the change from the "call and response" style arrangement in the hook and verse part is substituted for a unison part.

Incorporating this information into the concept of Moore's sound box, the change both in terms of arrangement[59] and sonic presence can be interpreted as an alteration of the texture. By reducing what Moore refers to as "density" (Moore 2001:121), the guitar and bass are drawn from the foreground of the sound box in the chorus, leaving a "hole" (ibid.) for the drums to enter. One possible conclusion to draw from this is that the shift in texture is simply a substitution of one element for the other, like shifting the focus of a photo through adjusting the lens. In the latter case, a similar image is implied, where the objects contained within the frame are subjected to a shift in clarity. Keeping in mind both the shift in space and the rhythmic organization, the chorus has a stronger sense of vertical stability. Another way of explaining the same concept is through the notion of a static space, as all implications of space are present at any given time through the musical flux.

[59] Implicating *what* the instruments are playing, which could also be included in the idea of composition

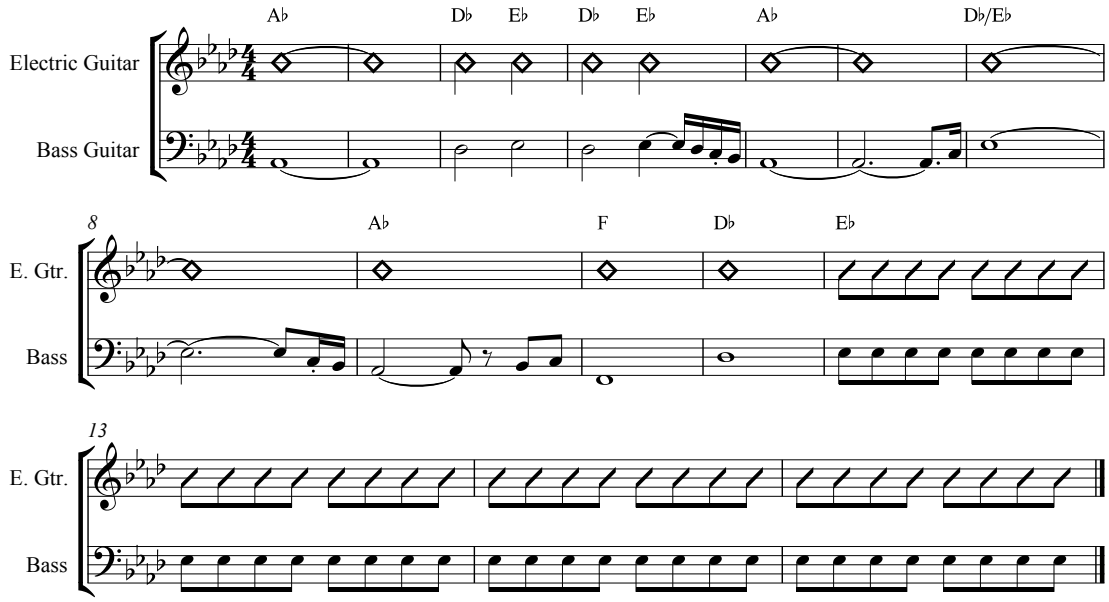

Fig. 6. Transcription shows the guitar and bass plays mainly sustained notes in the chorus section of the track.

3.5.5. Elements of collage

As mentioned briefly earlier in this chapter, Bowie described "Let's Dance" as a "postmodern homage" to "Twist and Shout" by the Isley Brothers. In this section, I will investigate how this description is stated in sound within the track. The most obvious reference given is the use of the vocal interlude of "Twist and Shout". Using such a widely recognized reference serves to evoke an expectation of what is to come. In other words, it introduces an imaginary framework evoking the message of "Twist and Shout". Instead of breaking into the expected opening phrase, something completely different is introduced, a contemporary adaptation of the original reference. Exploring this in a more general manner, there are several other elements that evoke a notion of "otherness". By this term, I mean elements that are distinctly foreign. Listening to the horn section, it clearly stands out from the rest of the 'high tech' sound of the track. Relating this to the use of the vocal intro, a possible interpretation of the horns is as a signifier of a previous era of dance music such as Glenn Miller or Louis Jordan.[60] Although the horns in "Let's Dance" clearly states an

[60] The riff is actually taken from Henry Mancini's "Peter Gunn Theme", according to Rodgers (Rodgers 2011:190).

element of reference, I would argue this serves more as an element of collage *rather* than a device of familiarization. Warner following the heading “The art of the familiar” deals with the use of reference material as familiarization.

> ... every pop record has musical characteristics that have appeared, in similar guises, on earlier records. As a result, inexperienced listeners will often find it difficult to differentiate one record from another, giving rise to the criticism that 'they all sound the same.' (Warner 2003:7)

I would argue that the first part of this statement could, by omitting the word pop, apply to most instances of recorded music in general. Warner himself addresses this on the next page, with reference to the practice of jazz standards. Rock music also has several characteristics answering to the need of presenting something familiar along with efforts to secure a sufficient element of perceived originality. As with the latter idea of a style of music appearing uniform to outsiders, or “inexperienced listeners” (ibid.), this again applies to most forms of music including classical. In the case of classical music, an inexperienced listener of such music hears it as simply classical. As Warner goes on to explain, the way in which the familiar elements are manifested may comprise a range of musical features. Also, the way in which the referential material is interpreted is of essence. As Warner explains:

> While this may be, and often is, interpreted as pop music's inability to renew itself as a form, it may also be viewed in a somewhat different light: the people who buy these records often have no memory of the original release and instead are fascinated by evocations of the past which has been reinterpreted *in the light of the present*. (ibid.:8)

The main point I wish to draw from this discussion is how elements of collage is used to connect the meaning of "Let's Dance" to its inspirations through explicit musical statement. In other words, Rodgers and Bowie put the sources of inspiration behind the track into the music as a tribute, or as Bowie stated, “a postmodern homage”. An important parameter is how the elements of tribute are contrasted to the rest of the track. In the instrumental hook of the track, the horns appear in a different manner than in the “Peter Gunn” riff of the verse. As mentioned earlier, the hook shows the use of horns as a sonic augmentation to the guitar. This function is vastly different to the use of horns in other sections of the track.

Bringing in guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughan further emphasize the collage-like aesthetic. Seemingly out of nowhere, a heavy blues inflected guitar solo comes in after the first chorus. As with the horn riffs in the verse section, the lead guitar appears as a clear contrast to the overall sound of the track.

Discussing the collage element of this particular track again brings attention to the returning problem of "who contributed what?" through the production. One possible analytic route when dealing with a producer's career is the use of a comparative approach. In the specific case of "Let's Dance", it seems that this element is more identifiable as coming from Bowie rather than Rodgers. I base this on the lack of collage aesthetic found in other productions credited to Rodgers. However, this hypothesis does not to any extent resolve the issue completely. What it offers is an indication as to the idiosyncrasies one might expect to hear in the context of any given producer's work.

3.5. Outside Chic, final notes

As producers progress, they also absorb influences along the way. Besides this, advances in technology will have an effect on how producers work to varying degrees. With Nile Rodgers, an observation that can be made through the chapter above is that he adopts technology in a way that is specific to him. His background as a band musician through his formative years as a musician greatly influences his work as a producer. There is a clear emphasis on discrete parts in all three examples above, perhaps not as prominent in "Let's Dance" as the other two tracks. An important issue to follow is the difference found in the three tracks selected. As stated in the introduction to the analysis, the conditions within the productions were quite different. "We Are Family" could be described as "all Chic Organization", as the writer/producer team was totally in control of the outcome of the project. With Diana Ross behind the microphone, things were different. There was a star present, presenting a different dynamic to the project. Working with Bowie provided a whole new scenario. Now there were two stars involved, the producer and the artist. Also, as Rodgers did not write the song, the workflow is quite different. A further question, which has been repeated on several occasions through this text is, "who did what?". Even though this question seems to be a returning concern, I do not think the answer is of key importance. When dealing with producers, the most important thing to address appears to be collaboration. How does the producer affect the artist, and vice versa. I find "Let's Dance" to be a prime example of how influence is bouncing between artist and producer. The guitar arrangement has a distinct Rodgers "flavor" to it, although it is different than what he had done before.

Chapter Four - Conclusion

"I'm kind of in this Nile Rodgers place right now"

-Pharell Williams

The goal through this thesis has been to describe the "sound" of Nile Rodgers music and productions. My approach has been to establish an interpretive framework through an investigation of the creative platform on which Rodgers founded his career.

In the chapter "Making up and showing off: what musicians do", Toynbee introduces the term "habitus" as defined by Bourdieu into his discussion on how to interpret the choices made within creative processes. The emphasis in the discussion led by Toynbee is how the term can describe a wide range of properties involved in a creative process: "For the present argument, the key aspect of habitus is the way it disposes musician-agents to play, write, record or perform in a particular way." (Toynbee 2000:36) In the context of the discussions in chapter one and two of this thesis, a key point drawn from Toynbee is how the habitus of the individual provides the framework of possibilities available and the choices made. So, discussing Rodgers' background as a musician doing tours and session becomes an important source of information as to the musical choices made later in his career. One key characteristic of Rodgers' sound, the use of the electric guitar, is carried over from this formative period before forming Chic. If one were to point at one singular sonic characteristic encompassing all of Rodgers' productions, it would be his guitar style. This follows the fact that he plays on nearly all the project he has been evolved in. What I find to be important in my discussion is not necessarily the guitar itself as a singular sonic element, but the role it has as in the way tracks are arranged.[61]

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[61] Rodgers speaks of himself as an arranger more than a mixer, in describing his way of working in the studio. Rodgers statement appears at 44.30 in *Nile Rodgers, Hitmaker* (viewed 16.04.2013): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVmAXWZu_PQ

A further point that can be traced back to the early days of Rodgers' career, pre-Chic, is the development of tracks as a collaborative effort. This process often took place on the studio floor, as the recordings were being made. In chapter two, I relate this to the way records was made at Motown and Stax. A consistent lineup of musicians is important to this process, because it ensures familiar mode of internal communication in the band. The style of each musician then becomes an integrated part of the overall sound that is produced. I will elaborate further on this discussion shortly. Generally, collaborations have affected Nile Rodgers' sound. Perhaps the most important is his involvement with Bernard Edwards. As mentioned in chapter two, the guitar style that was to become Rodgers' signature was a result of instruction from Edwards. The "chucking" rhythm style combined with Rodgers' jazz chops resulted in a unique approach to the instrument. Also, the interplay between the bass and guitar is a direct consequence of a collaborative effort.

Besides the instrumental arrangement, the production and arrangement of vocals is an important element in Rodgers' productions. In chapter two, my analysis was based upon the recordings of Chic. In the aforementioned BBC documentary (see footnote 61), Chic vocalist Fonzi Thornton explains how Luther Vandross influenced the Rodgers in the context of choir arrangements, especially concerning the use of unison and octave voicings.[62] The key point I am making here is that in every record production, the element of collaboration is crucial. As a result, the sound of a certain producer or production team has to be reviewed in light of the people they work with. As Zak puts it: "Making records is intrinsically a collaborative process, involving the efforts of a 'composition team' whose members interact in various ways." (Zak 2001:163) In this quote, the key point in this context is in the ways the members interact, which was very specific in the Chic Organization's sound.

When producing other artists, this particular way of distributing the groove among the band members carried on. This last statement introduces chapter three, focusing on the productions made by Rodgers outside the Chic framework. Especially

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[62] This is explained at 16:25 in *Nile Rodgers, Hitmaker*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVmAXWZu_PQ (viewed 17.04.2013)

in the case of Sister Sledge's "We are Family", the overall sound bears close resemblance to Chic. The key ingredients are all there, including the sparse orchestration and the unison voicing of the vocals. However, the analysis shows how the basic concept is recast to fit the artists while still exhibiting the Edwards/Rodgers signature sound. When producing Diana Ross, an important observation is how this project involved a different power relation compared to Sister Sledge. The sounding result of this can be heard in the production, as it departs more from the Chic sound. With Sister Sledge, Edwards and Rodgers were able to maintain complete control over both artists and production. When producing Diana Ross, they were faced with the challenge of having an established superstar in the studio. Consequently, they had to approach the project somewhat differently. The analysis of this track shows less similarity to the previous productions of Chic. However, the presence of a small rhythm section providing the core of the track is still noticeable. Also, the layout of parts can be traced back to the formula used in earlier productions. The upfront placement of the hook line and chorus is a trait found in most of the productions analyzed through this thesis. The same observation also applies to the dynamics and intensity. From the first beat, the track exhibits its dynamic high point. For the verse, the track is less intense. One might say that *intensity* is substituted for *intimacy*.

As the last track of chapter three, "Let's Dance" introduces a different scenario, with Rodgers producing a song written by the artist. Also, the band lineup was not the "regular" Chic ensemble.[63] Although a different group of musicians was used, it seems the Chic formula by this time was an integral part of Rodgers' production and arranging style. The analysis shows that elements known from previous productions by Rodgers are also clearly present on "Let's Dance". The guitar hook is immediately launched after a short lead in[64], with a distinct funk rhythm style that I have argued is at the center of Rodgers' arrangements throughout his career. Sonically, this track is a departure from the more documentary, live sounding style of Rodgers' earlier productions. As I have stated earlier, the documentary mode of production emphasizes the performative aspect by not exposing the studio process in

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[63] The Chic rhythm section, Tony Thompson (drums), Bernard Edwards (bass) and Rob Sabino (keys) all appear on other tracks on the "Let's Dance" album.

[64] The vocal buildup from "Twist and Shout".

an explicit way.[65] Both "We are Family" and "Upside Down" are following in this tradition to a higher degree than "Let's Dance". This comparison is however; highly dependent on when the recordings were done. As I have mentioned in the analysis of "Let's Dance", keeping in mind the process of naturalization is important. As explained by Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen (2013), what is perceived as natural in recorded music is constantly modified. Despite this, I still would argue that the first two tracks strive more towards being perceived as a live performance than "Let's Dance". In later productions, such as INXS' "Original Sin" and Duran Duran's "Notorious" the signature sound of Rodgers is less pronounced than on the recordings I have dealt with in this thesis. However, they still contain certain descriptive elements, like Rodgers' guitar playing. This is probably due to the fact that both groups were established band configurations, leaving less room for Rodgers to provide the arrangements. To support this point, listening to Madonna's "Like A Virgin" provides a good example. Faced with a non-established artist (which Madonna was at the time), Rodgers had more freedom to construct a sound within his own musical framework. The result was a sound more reminiscent of Chic-era productions, using the original Chic lineup of musicians. The point I am making here is that even though one can point at a number of elements as forming the signature sound of a producer, musician or artist, it does not necessarily mean that they are always present in every track. As Toynbee states in the context of genre, the variations of experiences makes it difficult, if not impossible, to come up with a "complete set of rules" (Toynbee 2000:128). Consequently, what I have been pursuing throughout this thesis is a view of where the ideas are coming from.

Methodically, this thesis has been founded on an aesthetic approach to the music and productions of Rodgers. My main sources to the information I have brought into my discussion has been various statements from the people involved in the music making process, as well as the outcome of these processes constituted by the recordings. A risk involved in using biographical material is an assumption of these writings as being a truthful representation of the events being described. On the other hand, a strength of this reference material is that they contain, in many cases, first hand information from the people that were involved. This perspective has been

[65] Again, the terms of opaque versus transparent mediation of Brøvig-Hanssen (2007) comes to mind.

of great value in dealing with the problem of "who did what?". A limitation of the approach I have chosen is that it does not deal with the social setting in an extensive way. This would have been an essential perspective to add if one were to explain why the music achieved great commercial success, as well as dealing with issues of authenticity, the downfall of disco and so forth. Besides this, a sociological approach could elaborate on the discussion on collaboration, as power relations, sound ideals and performance style are all negotiated within a social context.[66]

Through my efforts with this thesis, the work of Nile Rodgers has provided constant inspiration and reassurance to my choice of theme. As I am reaching the end of my project, Rodgers is proving his position as a legend of dance oriented music through yet another high profile collaboration. In 2013 he will be featured on the Daft Punk album "Random Access Memories", scheduled for release in May 2013. As Rodgers states in the introduction of the official "teaser" interview for this record[67] "Where I come from, groove is everything".

[66] "Musicians' Worlds: Music Making as a Collaborative Activity" (2006) by Peter J. Martin is an example of such an approach.

[67] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=da_Yp9BOCaI (viewed 17.04.2013)

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